



NOVELIZATION
Kotoko Hachijo

ORIGINAL STORY & ART
Shou Harusono

Sasaki and Miyano

SECOND-
YEARS





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Boys Life





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Sasaki and Miyano Second—Years

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I studied the placard by the door to the house, reading the name “Fujimi” on it two or three times. *Was she there?* I wondered. She had to be there. It was a silly thing to ponder—I’d texted her ahead of time, so I knew she was home.

I buzzed the intercom and took a deep breath as I waited. “Yes?” said a voice from the other end of the intercom. There was some static, but I was pretty sure it was her. My girlfriend.

“Uh... It’s Kuresawa,” I said, my tone erring on the side of polite. I felt a rush of embarrassment.

“Oh, Tasuku! Sure, I’ll open the door right now. Just a second.”

I thought I could feel myself flushing red just hearing that sweet voice.

The date was February 14—that long-awaited event known as Valentine’s Day. My girlfriend was home now, but she’d only gotten out of the hospital the other day. I couldn’t make her come meet me somewhere, not when it was still so cold out. We were left with one place to see each other.

Okay. I just have to act natural, I told myself. I shoved my hands into my pockets and clutched the portable hand warmers I’d stashed there. She’d given them to me the last time we saw each other, and she’d told me to keep them in my pockets because it was cold out. I made sure to have them along whenever I was going to be seeing her, and before I knew it, I’d reached for them a little too often, leaving the warmers a bit raggedy. I was chagrined by that, but of course I still couldn’t stop myself from instinctively grabbing them.

I didn’t understand how I could be such a bundle of nerves going to the house of the girl I liked. This was hardly the first time. I kept reminding myself that it wasn’t like we were going to be alone together; her parents would be there. I’d spoken to them in the past, but that thought didn’t relieve my anxiety.

A voice reached my ears before the door had even fully opened: “Thanks for coming over!”

“Thank *you* for having me,” I said, waving off her thanks. My palm was still heated from the hand warmer I’d been fiddling with a second before.

I shrugged off my coat, and after I’d washed my hands and greeted her

parents, we went up to her room. The minute she closed the door, she turned to me with a smile. “When I saw you just now, for a moment, I felt like we were meeting somewhere special. I dressed up a bit for today...”

She was wearing a fluffy dress that I hadn’t seen before, which looked as warm as it was adorable. She had on dark-brown tights as well, to keep her legs warm, I was sure. The perfect outfit for a winter day.

“I can see that! You look fantastic,” I said, passing her a blanket as she sat down on the carpet.

“Thanks, Tasuku,” she said, smiling shyly, and I was seized by the thought that I could look at that smile forever.

“Here. I got you a Valentine’s Day gift,” I said and held out a small paper bag I’d brought. She greeted it with a beaming smile. I’d done a lot of looking around and thinking to find the perfect gift for her and had come up with playful chocolates in the shape of marine life. There were dolphins and fish, shells and starfish—shapes practically made to delight my aquarium-loving girlfriend.

“Oh wow! Thank you! Here, this is for you,” she said. She gave me a dark, indigo-blue bag with an elegant astronomical design that made it look like it was sprinkled with stars. I knew what it was: a box of chocolates modeled after planets. They actually came from a place I’d been considering until the moment I finally bought her gift. I’d ultimately settled on the theme I thought she would like better. Her choice of gift made it seem like she’d been thinking the same thing.

“That’s great. Thanks, Yuki.”

We sat facing each other across the low table in the middle of her room. Her eyes were shining, but she cocked her head and said, “So tell me, how many chocolates did you get this year?” She looked so cute when she was being serious.

“I didn’t count. Maybe about forty? Lots of little ones again this year. They were doing that thing where they pile up chocolates on a desk for some friendly gambling, but I didn’t do it.”

It had been all small chocolates last year, too, but this was the second year they'd done this event, so everyone knew how it worked now. Maybe that explained the huge jump in people who brought candies. The other students had a great time playing card games and wagering chocolates of various sizes. The fervor didn't die down even after lunch break ended; some people clamored to keep playing after class.

Tashiro lost so miserably at poker that not only did he get stripped of almost everything he had on him—even clothing—he actually went into chocolate debt, so that he had to try to slip out during lunch break to get more. That was maybe the highlight of the games. A student ambling toward the front door at that hour of the day naturally attracted attention, which led to awkward questions being asked, which nearly resulted in our entire class getting a serious talking-to. Tashiro came up with the most half-assed excuse you could think of: He claimed that no one gave him chocolates, so he was going to get some for himself. It was just clever enough that they let him off with a stern warning, although I'm pretty sure the teachers knew what was going on.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the happily shirt-bereft Tashiro, you had Miyano, who hadn't been much for gambling at first. Most people were betting on anything and everything at blackjack, but Miyano wagered calmly and methodically, and by the end he'd won more than anyone in class. And he didn't even like sweets! I guess you could call not feeling any greed a certain kind of luck.

The wagers were ultimately split among those who'd lost out, so in the end even Tashiro was saved. Any chocolates that hadn't successfully been hidden away by the bell got stuffed into pockets. The guys who did that ended up smelling a bit like chocolate—but it got stronger later. I'd heard that the candy in the twist-tie packages unfortunately melted due to their body heat.

"Aww! Your all-guys school sounds so great! What a lot of fun," Yuki said.

"We have a few 'event-organizer' types who are always going full throttle," I said. Some classes didn't get as rowdy as ours, but we had a lot of people willing to start some fun and even more willing to join in, especially on a day that gave you as good an excuse as Valentine's Day.

“It kind of reminds me of what happened on Halloween. Remember what you told me?” she said. I did remember. On Halloween, lots of people had brought little toys and accessories that sort of served as costumes. It got so out of hand that Miyano, who was on the Disciplinary Committee, had been run ragged by the afternoon.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Lots of treats and plenty of fun,” I said. Then I ventured, “So... Am I the only one you gave chocolates to, Yuki?”

She gave me a cheeky look. “Hee-hee. You want me all to yourself?”

She was teasing me, but I looked her right in the eye and said, “I do. I wouldn’t know what to think if there was someone else you wanted to give chocolates to.” I saw her blush. Maybe in her mind, the question had been a lighthearted one, like the talk about my classmates.

She played with the blanket on her lap, her fingers running over the hem. “That’s no fair, Tasuku, going all serious like that.” She blinked her long eyelashes; she looked happy but also distinctly embarrassed. In fact, I didn’t know she could get so shy.

“I tried to pick something I thought you would like,” I said.

She relaxed and smiled, but there was still a faint flush in her cheeks. “Really? You’ve learned a lot, Tasuku.”

“Eh, it’s mostly thanks to Miyano... Oh, but I don’t mean you shouldn’t give chocolates to your family. Or, I guess, like, your friends.”

She chuckled. “I haven’t given anything to anyone yet. I wanted you to be first, naturally.” She looked at the floor. “I’m going to give my family their chocolates tonight. I bet we’ll eat them together. My friends and I are planning to have a chocolate exchange on our next day off.”

Oh, of course—they were going out of their way for her. It made me ashamed of my callousness. She was so cute, though. It made my heart leap.

“No fair...,” I mumbled, seized by an urge to avert my gaze. I’d taken off my coat, so I couldn’t even shove my hands in my pockets.

“Payback.” She grinned, and there was a hint—just the slightest hint—in her

smile that showed she really meant it. I tried to make sure I would remember that. She'd only just gotten out of the hospital and now actually got to spend the winter—a season when people often got sick—at home.

I'd been shocked when she'd cut her hair two summers ago, but after a year and a half it was getting long again. She had it tied into loose braids—a playful look that really suited her. The white ribbon woven into her hair, arcing gently among her locks, looked absolutely lovely. She was gorgeous no matter what hairstyle she was wearing, so much so that whenever I saw her, I trembled to think that she was *my* girlfriend.

“Okay,” I said, “should we get down to studying?”

“If you'd be so kind, Teacher,” Yuki said with deliberate formality, then giggled. I'd promised to help her with her homework after we'd exchanged chocolates.

“Er, first... Could we crack the door open? I mean, if you'd be cold, we don't have to...”

“Sure, sure. The heater must be really blasting in here for you.”

“No, it's all right. I just don't want to worry your parents.”

She gave me a puzzled look—but a second later she figured out what I was saying and nodded, looking a little embarrassed again. I opened the door—only the slightest bit, so that our voices wouldn't be a bother. And just as I opened it, my eyes met those of Yuki's mom, who had come by with drinks and snacks. I was a little nervous that she'd overheard us.

Her eyes were kind, and she was smiling as she said, “Thank you for being so considerate. I mean, about the door. But isn't it cold? If you don't mind the temperature, Tasuku, then maybe it would be best to keep it closed...”

Shoot. She had heard us.

“Thank you, but I would really prefer to leave it open,” I said. Maybe it would sound like I was trying too hard, but the last thing I wanted to do was cause unnecessary worry for the people who cared about Yuki.

My girlfriend, Yuki Fujimi, went to a correspondence school, and she had to

do most of her studying on her own. Keeping up with high-school level material when she was sick so often was a real struggle. I tried to help her as best I could to review things she wasn't quite getting. It was funny how, sitting across from each other like this, it felt like we'd been studying together forever. And yet back in middle school, when we'd actually been classmates, I hadn't even talked to her until some mutual friends had dragged me to visit her in the hospital.

"Oh, by the way. Miyano and Sasaki started dating recently," I said. We'd finished one review, and she'd set down her pencil for a moment. I'd wanted to mention it to her sometime today, and this felt like a natural moment. Heck, it almost felt like we went to the same school—like we were just chatting at lunchtime or during study period.

Her face lit up at the news and she clapped her hands together like she might start applauding. "They're going out? Congratulations to them! Oh my gosh! I'm as happy as if it were happening to me!"

And strangely, I felt happy too, receiving the congratulations on Miyano's behalf. Maybe I should let him know how delighted Yuki was for him.

"You are? You've never met them," I said.

"It doesn't matter," she replied. "You're obviously happy about it, so I'm thrilled, too!"

I didn't speak right away—I hadn't said anything about how I felt. I was too embarrassed to point that out, so all I could do was be quiet. I slid my glasses back up the bridge of my nose. It was like Yuki could see right into the deepest parts of me. She noticed slight shifts of emotion that even Miyano or Tashiro would have missed.

"That's what you do when you're embarrassed," she whispered with a smile, leaning toward me over the low table. The sweet, delighted tone in her voice—I had to cry uncle. I nodded slowly, trying not to bump Yuki's arm or the coffee cup.

"I'm not sure it's all happiness. It's more like...*finally*."

"Hee-hee!" She grinned, and she looked so much more at ease than she did in her hospital room. No matter how accustomed you were to hospital life, it was

good to be out; I was sure it must be a relief for her. The thought brought with it a wave of melancholy. I knew she needed those hospital stays for her own safety, and I knew she was an expert at finding fun wherever she was. But still.



“Are you sure you should be telling me this, though? Maybe the news was just for you,” she said.

“I made sure to ask if I could tell you,” I said. I didn’t want to spread gossip—there was no pride in that.

Despite this fact, though, she still looked thoughtful. “Did they agree right away?” she asked.

She was a sharp one.

“Maybe not *right* away,” I said.

“And how much did you pester them?”

I devised a simple means of not having to answer immediately: I sipped my coffee and studied the hem of the curtains, refusing to meet her gaze. Yuki, however, scooted around so she was looking at me. When I averted my eyes, she moved again, without a word. She left me no place to run. Also, she was way too cute. I saw no option but to plead the Fifth—although it seemed likely to be a useless gesture against my girlfriend, who had pressed me this far already.

“I know you, Tasuku. I’m sure you gave them those puppy dog eyes of yours until they gave in.” She sounded pretty sure. She should be—she knew firsthand how persistent I could be.

“I wouldn’t say I was *that* obnoxious,” I said.

“Oh, really?”

“It’s okay! Miyano said I could tell you,” I reiterated. *And I know he would say no if he really didn’t want me to*, I added silently.

She munched on a cookie, then blinked. A little surprised sound escaped her. She put her hand to her mouth, then finally asked, “Did you hear about that when you were at the hospital visiting me?”

“What makes you say that?” I asked. It so happened that she was right, but I was surprised she’d hit the nail on the head. She was too perceptive for me.

“There was that one time when something seemed a little off with you. You

checked your texts, then jumped up. I asked you what was wrong, but you said you would tell me another time... That was the moment, wasn't it?"

"I'm impressed you remember."

"You made such a loud noise when you jumped out your chair. It wasn't like you. It stuck in my mind." She smiled, full of confidence again.

I should have realized. I was always paying attention to the things she did, but I should've known she was paying just as much attention to me, too. She was watching so closely that she could shock me and feel good doing it. I was a little embarrassed that she could even tell when I was trying to hide my embarrassment, but that feeling was overwhelmed by the knowledge of how fortunate I was to have a girlfriend who understood me so well.

"Thanks," I said.

She responded with a gracious smile. "Sorry. I admit I'm just a *little* bit jealous." A tinge of discomfort entered her expression. It bugged me, and before I knew it, I was studying her carefully.

"Really?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. But I mean it when I say I'm more happy than anything."

I felt something like heat rising in me. She seemed to take the way I was fixated on her shy smile as some kind of demand, because she took a little sip of her coffee and said, "I know you turn your friends down a lot when they ask you to do stuff, Tasuku. You come to see me in the hospital all the time, and you spend most of your weekends with me except when you have tests. But even if you don't go out with them much, your friends keep inviting you to things."

"I guess so. Now that you mention it."

I prized Yuki above everything else, so I turned down invitations quite frequently, but people never stopped asking just because they assumed I would say no. She was right, but I hadn't realized how special that was until she pointed it out.

"When I think about how you really only get to be that close to people by seeing them often, I can't help but think how lucky you are. Stuff like who's

going out with who, that's not something you talk about except when you have friends in common."

I could see why she'd be envious—I got personal info about Miyano's dating life while she spent most of her time studying on her own. She was in touch with the other kids she did her schooling with, but you didn't get the same intimacy you did by seeing each other in the classroom every day. Maybe you wanted to show them how much they meant to you, but it would always be easier to just...not. Yuki knew the names of all her classmates, even the ones she hadn't gone to middle school with, so I knew she had more love in her than average. I was reminded that this was the reason she wanted to hear about my life at school.

"I promise I'll introduce you someday. I owe it to Miyano anyway."

"You do?" She gave me a surprised cock of the head, no longer following.

"He gave me a lot of advice about which manga to get for you. Sometimes you need someone who actually reads them if you want to know what they're about and which ones are popular." I kept up with a fair amount of the newest manga myself, but if you wanted to know, say, which series to read if you liked something specific, then you needed someone who was steeped in it.

"I didn't know that. I'd like to thank him."

"What, like on LINE? Over the phone? Don't tell me... In person?"

"Oooh, is that a note of jealousy I hear? But you promised to introduce me!"

"It's not... I mean, I wouldn't call it jealousy..."

I trusted Yuki, of course, and Miyano, too. I didn't think anything would *happen* between them. I just felt like, if they got to talking about BL, I wouldn't be able to keep up with the conversation.

Okay, so maybe I might get a *little* jealous. But that wasn't the point. I furrowed my brow, nodded to myself, and grunted. Alienation, maybe that was it. Being left out. I knew it wasn't very big of me, but I wanted to be the one she talked to, the one who was with her. So it's true, I didn't like the idea of a conversation I wouldn't be able to take part in—but that didn't mean I wanted to rain on her parade.

It was all a little depressing, for sure, and I was having trouble figuring out how to put it into words. I would never say she couldn't do it. It was more like, should I be there? *Could* I be there?

"Oh! Maybe, like, a LINE group chat!" I said.

"Oh, come on. You're such a worrywart," she said and grinned at me in a way that swept away all my anxieties.

"What?" I said. *A worrywart? How? About what?*

"I can hear it in your voice. It sneaked out."

I reflexively slapped my hand over my mouth and looked at her. "You don't mean that."

"Hee-hee! Feel free to join us, Tasuku."

"That's what you—? Argh..." I was mortified. The sheer humiliation wiped out everything else in my mind. It was like my childish thoughts had been overheard while I was the most discombobulated I'd ever been.

My eyes went to the floor. Yuki shuffled a little closer to me. "Tasuku? I think it would be nice to spend time with you, more than with anyone else. I mean now...and in the future, too. I'm trying to get healthier so I can do that."

In the future? More than with anyone else?

The simple words sounded like a proposal to me, utterly true and sweet.

But wait... Was I sure? Was I really understanding her right? Today was Valentine's Day, after all.

Somewhere along the line, my glasses had slid back down the bridge of my nose—I felt like I'd straightened them a second ago. I gently pushed them back up. Weird. I'd just had them adjusted over winter break—were they getting loose again already?

"You're all red, you know," Yuki said.

"What do you mean? What is?"

"Your face, Tasuku! So... What do you say?"

Yikes! My facial expressions weren't usually so...obvious! Eventually I

managed, “I think, uh, it’ll take me some time to figure out the best way to answer you.”

She laughed, louder than usual. “Ha-ha! I’ll wait as long as you need.”

As long as I need. It was hard not to read into that.

I told her my throat was dry, which I guess I didn’t really need to say, because the next thing I did was pick up my cup.



“I wonder which BL would make the best thank-you gift,” Yuki said. “What kind of stuff does Miyano like?”

No one had ever asked me that before. I could explain what *she* liked, at least to a point, but Miyano? “I don’t know,” I admitted.

“You should take a little interest in your friends’ preferences!”

Talk about easier said than done! It was nice to have a little easy banter like this, though.

“I don’t care about *men’s* preferences,” I said.

“Try to remember. Something he said when he was giving you advice, or something he talked about even though you didn’t bring it up. Anything at all would give us a hint.”

“You’re really serious about this,” I said. Because she asked, I searched my memory as best I could, but not much came to mind. “Let’s see... I think his tastes are pretty eclectic. Oh, I guess one time he said he always used to read school stories, but now he can’t anymore and he reads stuff about adults instead. And I think he said he reads a lot of gag stuff and things with happy endings.”

The gag stuff might have been something he was recommending to Sasaki, though. Wow, I really *didn’t* remember much. I felt bad for Yuki, who was nodding sagely; I wanted to come up with something definite if I could.

“I see,” she said. “Upbeat stuff inspires empathy, not just with the uke’s change of heart, but with the seme, too. Best of all is that feeling they give you when you’re done reading.”

“Huh. I never knew.”

It was obvious from the way she was talking: If she and Miyano met, they would have their own personal BL roundtable going in no time. When Miyano talked about this stuff with Sasaki out in the hallway, he got so enthusiastic that he would do the classic smack-your-palm-on-the-wall—in fact, he would practically slam his entire body into it. And that was how he got when Sasaki would fearlessly bring up the subject—the passion would only be multiplied

when two BL-lovers got together.

“Doesn’t Miyano talk to you about BL? Like, which series he especially enjoyed or anything?”

“Sometimes he uses vocabulary that’s unique to *fudanshi* or something. And sometimes he talks about his BL fantasies or suggests, like, potential plots that he sees around him. But he doesn’t give me his thoughts on any particular series like you do.” I suspected he only did that with Sasaki, although I didn’t say so, since it was just an assumption. “If anything, I probably talk to him more than he talks to me.”

“About what?”

“Bragging about my girlfriend...”

When I started in on that subject, all my friends at school would just give me a *there-he-goes-again* look, but Yuki didn’t know about any of that and thought I was teasing her. She puffed out her cheeks. “Bah! But you talked a lot on the school trip in second semester, right? Wait... Hold on. You *did* talk about something other than me, didn’t you?”

“Things other than you, Yuki? Oh, uh, let’s see...,” I said apprehensively and pretended to think. I tried to look very serious as I said, “I’m not...coming up with anything.”

She gave me a look. “You’re joking... Right? No... No way!” She sounded downright distraught. I felt bad; I’d pushed it a little too far.

“It’s a joke! Don’t worry. Let’s see. On the school trip... I guess maybe we talked about some things you would enjoy hearing about.”

“Like what? Spill!”

Now that I thought about it, I realized I never told Yuki what had happened on the trip in much detail. We’d talked on LINE and on the phone while I was away, so she had a general idea of where I’d gone and what I’d done. When I got back, I’d shown her my photos and we talked about where we’d like to go, what food we’d like to eat. Pretty soon, it was like we were planning a vacation of our own, and the subject of who exactly did what on the school trip never really came up.

I remembered looking at a map with her, tracing where I'd gone. I remembered the way her eyes shone as she looked at the pictures in the guidebook, how lovely she'd been. And then she'd asked me, "It'd be just the two of us, right?" She couldn't hide the nervousness in her voice, and then I got a case of nerves, too, so on the way home that day it didn't matter that it was a chilly afternoon; I was warm right down to the tips of my fingers. I could still feel that heat even now.

"We talked about, like, romance and stuff."

My girlfriend—always cute to begin with—gave me her brightest smile. Her eyes sparkled, more beautiful than the stars in the night sky. "Boys talking about love! This I *have* to hear," she said, clenching her delicate hand in a fist. I laid my hand over hers.

"All right. Let me start at the beginning," I said.

This was before Miyano and Sasaki had started dating. We'd all been at the hotel one night, talking about matters of the heart. I also worked in a little something I'd overheard, something that stuck in my mind, even if my conclusions might be baseless.

So I chatted with my girlfriend about my classmates, the pleasure written on her face even though she'd never met these people. The conversation warmed me in a way none ever had before.



There was a school trip in the autumn of students' second year. We were given a lot more freedom than most other schools, and we could pick a destination: Hokkaido, Okinawa, or Hawaii.

When trying to pick a location, the obvious place to start was by asking upperclassmen for their opinions, so I talked to the senior members of the Astronomy Club. Tashiro—who seemed to know everyone—talked to Hanzawa and all the other upperclassmen he knew, and Miyano naturally turned to Sasaki. Ultimately, the three of us picked Hokkaido. We even ended up talking to some of the same upperclassmen, what with the overlap in clubs, committees, and stuff.

We were told that everything in Hokkaido was on another level, up to and including the hotel breakfast, the taste of the fish, and even the sweets, which used ingredients sourced right there on the island. "I wish I could go again," said the guy I talked to. "I would go every year if I could! I think I'd like to try going in summer next time." You could hear the passion in his voice. I took note; sounded like it offered plenty of opportunities for a trip with my girlfriend someday.

It was mostly up to the students to plan the trip activities, so once a week when we were all together for sixth period, we spent the hour in different classrooms split according to destination. We brought the materials the school had given us along with guidebooks and other info, chatting and laughing and occasionally getting distracted as we planned out what we would do.

The trip would span four nights and five days, but the fifth day would just be traveling home, so technically it was a four-day excursion. This was our first chance to plan our own trip, and opinions flew. We made a plan, then tore it up and made a new one.

Day one would be in the city of Sapporo, where each of us could pick a hands-on learning experience that sounded interesting: the planetarium, mountain climbing, candle making, and even making ice cream. I thought I would be all about the planetarium at first, but the one people chose was somewhere I had already been. True, that was back when I was little—my parents had taken me—so I was sure it would be a different experience now. I did want to go back.

But it didn't have to be this time. This was my school trip, after all.

With that in mind, I decided to follow Miyano's lead. He wanted to make ice cream.

"Even though you don't like sweets, Miyano?" I asked. I had to say, his choice was a surprise. I assumed ice cream was no exception to his disinterest in sweet treats. He nodded, although he indicated that there was something else going on.

"I thought you weren't much of a cook, either, Miyano," said Tashiro, who was sitting beside us and looking confused.

"Making ice cream isn't *cooking*," I interjected. It was more like mixing.

Miyano looked decidedly unenthused. "It *is* cooking!" he groaned.

He really was a terrible chef. When I thought back on his failures in our cooking classes, I knew it wouldn't be fair of me to just chirp *It's easy!* or whatever.

"That sponge cake was like rubber. It was hilarious!" Karasubara, one of our classmates, said with a chuckle.

"It's not *that* funny." Miyano grumbled. In addition to being much too dense, his had also been the only cake to come out a strange color.

"And I almost broke my teeth on those cookies!" Shirahama added.

A certain someone who'd tried that treat claimed they were hard because of "preservatives."

"I said I was sorry!" Miyano shot back at his hecklers. Miyano's mind seemed made up. Even his handwriting on the handout looked forceful somehow. I still wasn't sure if making ice cream was real cooking, but I had to admit that Miyano was worthless in the kitchen. Stirring and mixing might be too much for him.

"So why the urge to try now?" I asked.

After a second, he responded, "The upperclassmen did it last year." So he was following in a certain someone's footsteps—just a year later. He didn't say as much, but I thought I was right. Well, he had said something about, if not being

in love with Sasaki, being a big admirer of his.

I offered a noncommittal *Oh, really?* as I wrote the name of the dairy farm for making ice cream on my application form.

“All this talk is making me want some ice cream. Maybe I’ll join you. I want some fresh-made stuff!” Tashiro said, peeking at our sheets and twirling his pencil.

“Sounds like there’s a lot of places you’d like to visit, Tashiro.”

“There are! There’s so many places! I guess I won’t get to all of them...”

“Knowing you, I’m not surprised. You’ll have to pick and choose,” Miyano said.

“Yeah... Guess so...”

I couldn’t resist a little smile at their banter.

In the end, some other friends convinced Tashiro to go mountain climbing, and he could be heard mumbling “Wonder if I need any equipment.” Immediately, someone piped up, “It’s all right there on the handout, champ.” It was just going to be a short hike, not more than a few hours. I thought it was a bit much, given that they were going to climb a different mountain the same night, but the Athletics Club proved pretty popular, and slots filled up quickly. Tashiro was always cheerful and easygoing, so he seemed likely to inspire anyone who got too tired hiking.

“I feel like having you along would save us from getting tired,” said Miyano, who was apparently thinking the same thing I was.

“Everyone has their gifts,” he said.

“So I see,” Miyano said with a small smile.

So the first day of our school trip started with making ice cream, and Miyano proved to be every bit as unsuited to the work as we’d expected. Tools and materials were provided to us; all we had to do was mix things together according to the recipe, but Miyano’s ice cream just wouldn’t thicken.

“Sasaki said it came together right away,” Miyano groaned, confused. The rest

of us were done already. I glanced in his bowl and saw that the ice water that was supposed to chill the ingredients was a cloudy white. It was obvious some of it had spilled.

We were running out of time, though. Someone from the farm, unable to bear the sight any longer, helped Miyano by adding some salt, mixing a bit, and then checking to see if the mixture was starting to thicken. They stayed with him pretty much the rest of the time.

After making ice cream, we took a tour of the city. I'd seen the famous clock tower in photos and it always looked small, but when I stepped inside I was almost overwhelmed by the historic feeling that pervaded the place. Placards around the building mentioned a few things I'd studied, and the lecture hall on the second floor had a palpable authority to it. This used to be a school, so no wonder it felt like stepping into some old university.

The walls had the deep amber patina characteristic of old wooden buildings, making the solidity of the construction more apparent. What a place to learn. I loved the unique atmosphere of these spots that exuded history. When we went back outside, I was startled by the way the ginkgo trees along the road seemed especially colorful and even the sky looked brighter than usual.

We worked our way along, keeping one eye on the map, occasionally popping into a store here and there. We got back to the hotel before dark and other groups slowly filtered in after us.

The mountain-climbing group had gone straight to and from the hotel—no hoofing it around the city—so they were eager to do a little souvenir shopping; a few of them bought snacks at the hotel shop even though dinner was just a few minutes away.

Suffice to say, day one's schedule was pretty packed. There was also nighttime sightseeing from a ropeway after dinner. It was first come, first serve, with no regard to our afternoon groups. It was only autumn, but even with a coat on I felt a little chilly. I'd made the right choice to follow the upperclassmen's advice and go with a light down jacket.

I ended up in the same cable car as Miyano. I learned they were technically called gondolas, and they were surprisingly spacious inside. Ours started to feel

awfully cramped, though, as it progressively filled with high school boys. Okay, maybe it wasn't as bad as the train on my morning ride to school, but still.

We had traveled all the way to Hokkaido, but with our gondola full of our schoolmates, the space felt comfortable and familiar. I picked up the murmur of conversation all around me.

I overheard someone saying, "Why'd you pick Hokkaido? I mean, I know it's a little late to ask, but most of Class A went to Hawaii." I guess one of the guys nearby was from Class A. It was a little unusual. The guy talking to him was obviously from some other class. Our school had a lot of different programs, which was part of what gave each class its own special character. I don't want to say that was the whole reason so much of Class A had chosen to go overseas together, but that was part of it.

"Well, Hirano said *he* went to Hokkaido..."

"There you go talking about that 'Hirano' again! Who *is* he anyway?"

"Not telling."

Hirano, like, Hirano? The upperclassman? I thought. I hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but my ears picked up that name specifically. It made me glance to the left.

Big: That was my first thought when I saw the guy nearby, the one who had mentioned Hirano. He was taller than I'd expected, maybe even taller than Sasaki. I'd always been a little suspicious of the way Miyano claimed to see Hirano as an uke, but if the other guy was this big, it suddenly made a lot of sense. (Never mind whether that actually *was* the other guy.)

Besides being taller than average, this person looked really...manly. I'd always assumed a seme would be the forceful go-getter of the two, but I realized now that an athletic type like this would make a pretty good partner, too.

Would Yuki want to know about this? I wondered. Like I always did when I had that question, I automatically grabbed my smart phone.

"What's up, Kuresawa? You look like you've got something on your mind," said Miyano, who had turned away from the scenery and toward me.

I had no idea what to say. He didn't seem to have heard the conversation, and I didn't necessarily want to tell him exactly what I was thinking. There was guessing and there was *guessing*. Instead I said, "I wanted to share this gorgeous scenery with my girlfriend."

"Of course. You're always thinking about her."

"Not necessarily!" We spoke in soft voices, and I felt like I might be sucked straight into the brilliant starry night. I said, "Hey, different topic, but I'd never seen crab at a buffet before. Have you?"

"Nah, me neither. And you could make your own salmon or squid rice bowls! Couldn't believe it," he said.

"That's cooking even you can do!"

"I wouldn't call putting fish on top of rice *cooking*," Miyano said sourly, obviously remembering what had happened with the ice cream that afternoon. "Speaking of which, did you see the sashimi at the convenience store?"

"No! They had sashimi? Wish I'd got some," I said. I heard Miyano mumble something about how it was a different world here. Behind him, the night spread out around us. It was picturesque, even if we were talking about seafood.

If I take this shot and send it to Sasaki, would that count as paying him back for the help he gave us? Maybe at least a little? I pulled out my phone and turned toward Miyano. He didn't look convinced. "What, a photo? You won't be able to see anything," he said. Had he guessed, from the angle I was taking?

"Maybe if I use the flash," I said.

"Yeah, and blind everybody. Why are you taking my picture anyway?"

It didn't look like he was keen on being in my photo, but I decided to try something. "For my girlfriend," I said. The perfect cover. If I told him I was going to send it to Sasaki, he would never let me do it. But for Yuki, maybe. And maybe I *would* send it to her. Sasaki had been loath for anyone to see Miyano at the drag contest, but my classmate was in ordinary clothes right now. No problem... Right?

“Absolutely not,” he said. Not even for Yuki, huh?

I didn’t say anything—just hit the shutter.

“I said, don’t take my picture!” Now he was upset. I looked at my shot: The backlighting from the night scenery was too strong, and Miyano was an indistinct shadow in the foreground.

“It didn’t come out,” I said. “I’ll delete it.”

“I told you,” he grumbled.

As I hit the trash button, I remembered: At the drag contest during the culture fest, Sasaki had made it perfectly clear that he liked Miyano *that way*. I wondered what the two of them were going to do. Sasaki’s graduation was right around the corner.

“What about Sasaki? What are you going to do about that?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“He’s graduating pretty soon. If you want to tell him how you feel, you don’t have long. What do you really think about...how he feels about you?”

I kept my voice down so no one would hear us, but I was plenty loud enough for Miyano. He’d been looking out the window, but now he abruptly turned to his left, toward me. His face was so red, I could see it even in the dim light. It seemed to give the nighttime a crimson glow.

“What do you mean...what about Sasaki?” he said.

“I mean—let’s say hypothetically,” I answered, finding myself surprised and trying to backpedal.

“Y-yeah. Of course. Hypothetically.” Miyano’s voice was even smaller than mine. I had to lean toward him to make sure I heard him. He sounded so faint, his words were almost lost in the buzz of the gondola.

“What if you told him you like him?” I said. As someone who’d had to wait to hear those words myself, I sympathized with Sasaki.

“I could, but... I mean, *hypothetically* I could, but what if I don’t feel it the way he does? Maybe I couldn’t give him the respect he deserves. Maybe I’d hurt

him. I can't say something like that just to be nice."

"Well, by seeing things from each other's perspectives, won't you be able to move forward together? The fact that you're worried shows this isn't a whim." A person only talked like that if they were taking things seriously.

Miyano grimaced. "That's sort of the whole problem... It's like, what if I say something to him, and *then* we realize we're not on the same page?"

"You're such a worrywart. Maybe you'd find out you liked him even more when you put those feelings into words." From where I was standing, it was obvious that Miyano was more than serious enough to respond to the guy.

"How's that work?"

His question caused Yuki's face to drift into my mind. How could I put this? When I thought back, Miyano seemed pretty easy to read. Hirano and Sasaki were the upperclassmen he'd consulted with before our trip, but when we all got together to share info, most of his seemed to come from Sasaki. I'd already known Sasaki liked Miyano, but what if it wasn't unrequited love? What if Miyano liked Sasaki, too? When I asked myself that question, a lot of pieces fell into place.

Looking at the things they did and said, the moments they shared were cast in a different light and I realized Miyano had feelings for Sasaki, too. I even thought, *He should just tell him!*

I'd asked my girlfriend out on the day we graduated from middle school, but she didn't give me an answer until the end of March. Maybe that was why I was so sensitive to graduation as a kind of dividing line. After we'd been dating for a while, Yuki told me that "everything" I did made her happy, but to be honest, on some level I found that hard to believe.

"Well," she'd said, "*you do it all because you care for me, right?*" That was some confidence! With a smile on her face, she'd assured me that the love I'd wanted to express was reaching her. That had thrilled me above all else: that she didn't doubt my feelings for a second.

All of it was because we'd started from that one word: love. By telling each other how we felt, we gained the trust that everything else would be all right. If

we hadn't said that, hadn't conveyed that to each other unambiguously, I don't think we could ever have built our relationship.

That was when I felt my love for her become something unshakable, like the way your parents love you, something you're born with. After that, I saw her trust for me in everything she did, and it made me love her all the more.

"Let's see," I said now. "Do you get along with your parents, Miyano?"

"I mean, I guess so. We talk a lot." He sounded surprised; it probably seemed like a sudden change of subject.

"Then I think you already know what I'm talking about. With your parents, sometimes things are cool and sometimes you fight, but there's trust underneath all of it, right?" I started to feel embarrassed, actually saying it out loud.

"Yeah, I guess... But..." He seemed a bit lost for words.

It didn't just work that way with your parents—it was the same with your friends. Not that I would be able to say it to his face.

"That kind of trust, being comfortable with each other like that, you build it up over time. For me and my girlfriend, it began when I told her how I felt, and she responded. When you're dating, when you're both in love, there's a lot of stuff you're not used to. It can be pretty anxiety-inducing. But you're starting from a different place than when the feelings are one-sided. The relationship doesn't begin until both of you are in it, so though I was the one who confessed, the way she cares for me comes from an even deeper place. I'm so much happier than when that love only existed in my head."

I'd launched into this little speech just hoping to help Sasaki if I could, but I was warming to my subject in a big way. By this point, it was obvious from Miyano's expression that he was getting embarrassed listening to me.

"Well, uh, I wish you lots of happiness in your future," he mumbled.

"Thanks. I think I'll be happy my whole life," I said.

The gondola arrived at the intermediate station, halfway up the slope. "You know, that car really didn't rock too much," Miyano said as we got off, like he

just thought of it.

“Now you notice?” I said with a laugh.

Once outside, two things occurred: We were met with a bone-chilling cold, and a bunch of students headed for the bathroom. Miyano and I just took in the night scenery. We decided to talk for a few more minutes and then catch a gondola back down.

“Hey... That stuff you said. I think it helped me understand why Sasaki’s seemed...more lovely to me since he told me how he felt,” Miyano said.

“Yeah?” I said, wondering if there might be a little *development* in this storyline when we got back. Maybe around Christmas or so? Not too far in the future. I realized that demanding a progress report would probably be too much rubbernecking—but Miyano being Miyano, I knew all I had to do was keep an eye on him. It would be easy enough to tell what happened.

I decided not to say that I wanted him to be happy—it would put too much pressure on him. But it was the unvarnished truth. He and Sasaki had both been a big help to me, and I wanted the best for them. (Forget for a minute that I was also eager to report on them to my girlfriend.)

Our conversation drifted away with the wisps of our breath in the cold air. I aimed my phone at the vast, dark night again, this time taking care there was no one else in the frame. I’d send the shot to Yuki, naturally.

“I guess this is what the upperclassmen saw last year,” Miyano said.

“You’re bringing that up now?”

“When else am I supposed to bring it up?” He sounded put out, but as the long, thin strands of mist floated from his mouth, he turned toward the great shimmer of light and hit the shutter. Not that I believed he would send the picture to anyone. But that wasn’t the point, I thought. He was carving the scene into his memory, so that he would remember that here, at this moment, he’d been thinking about his upperclassman. That was my guess anyway, from my own experience with Yuki.

After Mt. Moiwa, we went back to the hotel and headed straight for the bath.

I knew all my roommates in our six-person room, including Tashiro, which made it easy to kick back and relax. We each grabbed a futon at random and flopped down, (while Miyano put a stop to Tashiro's antics, who was mumbling about starting a pillow fight) chatted, and joked.

Having been dissuaded from the pillow fight, Tashiro said, "You know how sometimes, when a guy gets out of the bath with his hair all wet, he looks so different you're like, *Who's that?* Well...you look exactly the same, Karasubara."

"Is that an insult?!" Karasubara snapped. I guess he was ticked, but it was true—his hair was frizzy all year round and had just as much volume when he got out of the bath as when he got in. Tashiro had been known to compare Karasubara's light-toned locks to a bird's nest. "I guess he can only remember guys by the shape of their hair. So much for that perm I was gonna get to try to settle this mess down."

"And Shirahama worked so hard on you. He used the hair dryer like a real stylist!" quipped Miyano. His hair wasn't as finicky as Karasubara's, but it was close. Shirahama had monopolized one of three hair dryer stations in the changing room and battled so hard that sweat started pouring down his forehead. So much for the bath he'd just taken! It must have stung that after all that, the hair didn't even set.

"Drying it should have helped a *little*. Keep it from jumping up without having to wax it. Stubborn stuff," said Shirahama with a resentful look at Karasubara's hair, where it spread out over the sheets.



That led to a discussion about hair products and hairstyles, peppered with talk about the stuff we'd done and the food we'd eaten that day. We were just sort of chatting away when one of us, Hiwatari, exclaimed, "I've got a new topic for us—L-O-V-E!" and the discussion took a new turn.

"I'll take point on this one," I said. If I didn't, who would?

"No, you go last," said Karasubara, an excitable event-planner type of guy.

"We'll be here an hour. I should know, it's happened to me," Tashiro said, recoiling in what I felt was really an overdramatic reaction. He was holding a bottle, one of the carbonated juice drinks they'd served at dinner in lieu of beer. And here he'd just brushed his teeth.

"Okay, right at the end, then. We can fall asleep to it, like a lullaby," said Shirahama. He was good friends with Tashiro and was in step with him now, but his remark was even more cutting. He was starting to yawn; he was on the basketball team at school and had been mountaineering today.

"You know what they say—fall asleep to a lullaby of love and you'll live it in your dreams," said Hiwatari, openly envious of me. He'd been the one to bring the subject up, but I guess he didn't have any actual romantic experience to share. (Maybe it wouldn't be nice to say that out loud.)

Miyano was grinning a little. He was ahead of the curve on this subject, as of just a few hours ago.

"Okay, I'll start," offered Shirahama. "Girls... Let's see... I want a girl shorter than me. I want to be able to pat her on the head." Not a surprising declaration from a guy who always seemed shallow and superficial.

"Pat her on the head? Yuck. What a way to talk," Hiwatari said. I agreed with him.

"Short girls, huh? I guess you've got the height. But you're not even 180 cm, are you?" Tashiro asked.

"I'll have you know I'm 175," Shirahama shot back. He was so slim that he looked taller than the number suggested.

"So I guess 170 would be about right, in Shirahama-Land?" Tashiro said.

“Yeah, that would be fine. All girls are cute anyway.” I guess he didn’t mind tall girls, either.

“All of them? So you’d be okay with an older girl?”

“Oh, for sure. One hundred percent!”

“This guy doesn’t have *any* criteria!” Karasubara groaned.

“I really screwed up going to an all-guys school,” Shirahama said. “I should’ve gone coed.” To hear him talk, you did have to wonder what he was doing in a men-only institution.

“You mean it? Just the other day, you were saying how easy life is with only guys around.” Leave it to Tashiro not to let him off easy.

“When was this?”

“After gym class. You said the guys all stink, so you didn’t have to worry about your body odor.”

“You’re imagining that. Anyway, Tashiro, you wouldn’t know if I stink. I’m always careful on the way home.” Coming from Shirahama, who never allowed so much as a hair on his head to be out of place, you could believe it.

“Oh, c’mon. No guy ever smelled good,” Karasubara interjected.

“Mere prejudice from someone who makes no effort to maintain good hygiene.”

“I make *some* effort!”

Banter like this between Karasubara and Shirahama was perfectly ordinary in class, so it was strange to me that it seemed so special while we were all lying around. I continued to listen and refrained from pointing out the fact that this wasn’t really “love talk,” they were just talking about types.

“Smell...” I heard Miyano murmur from beside me. It didn’t sound like a carefully considered part of the conversation; more like it had escaped without his meaning it to.

“What’s that?” I asked softly.

He flinched and blinked. “Oh, nothing... I just suddenly remembered how

Sasaki smells like bread sometimes.”

“Oh...”

He just remembered? What kind of answer was that? I wondered if he knew that Sasaki’s family ran a bakery. I was pretty sure I’d mentioned that I’d seen Sasaki at his part-time job once, but I wasn’t sure I had actually told Miyano at that moment. Sasaki had popped out of the store, and I’d realized that was where he lived.

Eh... Never mind.

“Okay, my turn next. Karasubara! Okay? Why thank you.”

“Great! You’re your own MC,” Tashiro quipped, teasing him for essentially playing to his own crowd.

“Laugh it up,” Karasubara said. “Anyway, me, I like women who know their history.”

“Are you a history buff?” Miyano asked, and Karasubara nodded emphatically.

“Sure am. History is a story! We’re left with the conclusion, and we research and investigate, and uncover what happened and where and how piece by piece. I love putting those puzzles together, using whatever we know happened and letting my imagination take it from there. And sometimes they’ll find some old book, and that one text will turn everything we thought we knew upside down! History is new every day!”

“Gee, you make it sound pretty neat,” said Tashiro. He always said exactly what he meant, so his compliment made Karasubara blush a bit. I understood—Tashiro was such a straight shooter with his kind words that you could get a little bashful.

“Well, uh, I mean, that’s the reason that makes me sound good,” Karasubara said. “But the truth is, in my first year of middle school, there was this girl in my class who liked history. I mentioned something about the subject to her, just something I’d picked up on TV, and she was so thrilled. She started to talk to me all the time, and I thought she was really cute. And that was... I mean, my first love... And thanks to her, I started studying a lot about history.”

There was a collective sigh as Karasubara finished talking. “No fair dropping a bittersweet story of first love on us! I wasn’t ready, and you hit me right here!” Shirahama said, pounding himself on the chest.

“So what happened with this girl?” Tashiro demanded.

Karasubara shook his head. “I told her how I felt about her on the day of our graduation ceremony, but she shot me down. She said she wanted someone like the great warlord Oda Nobunaga...so his era is the only one I can’t stand.”

That story sounded vaguely familiar... Even if the ending was different.

“Really? But you get such good grades in history class,” Hiwatari said.

“That’s because I can’t *un*-learn stuff about the warring states period! Even if I hate it! So of course I put what I know on tests and whatever. *She* loved that time period, so I learned a lot about it while I was busy having an unrequited crush!” Apparently, Hiwatari had struck a nerve. This was the tricky part of sharing your love stories.

“That’s knowledge hard-won,” Shirahama said. I wondered if he had a crushing story of first love, too, even if he wouldn’t fess up to it.

“I wish I could get good grades,” said Tashiro, who seemed to be enjoying the pathos.

“Damn right you do.” Karasubara laughed, and then he said, “Hiwatari, you next.”

“My case is pretty classic: She was a manager for the same club I was. *Really* cute girl.”

“I thought this was an all-boys school?!” Miyano almost choked.

“There are other schools! They do exist! You can bump into the manager of another school’s team!” He sounded very passionate about it, but everyone looked at him in confusion. The natural question was: Even if you happened to meet another school’s manager, would you really have a chance to talk with her?

“She’s nothing but an opponent, then,” I pointed out.

“And her school’s team must be good, right? Otherwise they wouldn’t be a

rival,” Miyano said. “What are we good at? Soccer, basketball, kendo... Maybe ping-pong, too.”

At the word *ping-pong*, Tashiro sat up suddenly. “What team are you on again, Hiwatari?”

“Geez. The soccer team,” he said. He seemed annoyed, but honestly, I hadn’t been sure either, so I was glad Tashiro asked.

“What position?”

“I’m the manager.”

Now it made sense.

“You are?! I guess you can think of another school’s manager as your rival...”

“Sounds like a tough job,” said Karasubara, nodding and looking very engaged.

“It keeps me pretty busy, yeah, but I like the behind-the-scenes stuff. Not just helping out with practices but tracking data and keeping in touch with whoever we need. I really enjoy it.”

I made an impressed noise. It sounded like a lot of detailed work.

“Don’t you ever wish you were on the field?” asked Miyano. He was no athlete and not even a manager, but something about this seemed to have spoken to him. Actually, thanks to my girlfriend’s lessons, I thought I knew what it was: probably the potential relationships he imagined between the players and the manager at an all-boys school. Intra-team BL. *Sigh*.

“I actually did play up until middle school, but I liked watching games better. Besides, sometimes we would go to practice games against other schools, or they would come to us, and a lot of the managers handling prep and keeping everything moving were girls. It was like, *Wow!* I knew how much work it was, and it was great to watch them pull it off.”

“Ah, the bloom of youth,” Miyano said. Come to think of it, one of the recent books my girlfriend asked me to buy featured a sports team at an all-boys school.

“Never got a girlfriend out of it, though,” Hiwatari said.

“Wouldn’t be the bloom of youth if you had.”

Gee, this story even came with a punchline.

“All right, next is... Let’s go with Tashiro!” Karasubara said.

Tashiro cocked his head contemplatively. “My type, huh...” He played with his long, slightly damp bangs. For once in his life, he looked like he was thinking seriously. “Hmm... Huh... My first love...”

Did it really take that much thinking?

“Don’t have one? Or you don’t remember her?” Miyano asked, looking almost as confused as Tashiro.

“What, a first love? I think it was probably a teacher in elementary school or something.”

“I knew you’d always been into older women!” Shirahama joked. I wondered if he knew something about Tashiro’s past that we didn’t.

“What do you mean, you knew?! Anyway, my type... My type is whoever I have a thing for at that particular moment.”

“That’s not a type!” Karasubara said. He didn’t look happy—maybe he was still stewing after that heart-wrenching story of lost love.

“I mean, how am I supposed to know? Besides, I don’t want to cut down my options by getting stuck on one thing.”

So he won’t turn down any offers? If that was true, though, it seemed like Tashiro shouldn’t have any trouble falling in love and getting someone to love him back. Just personally, I was leery of introducing my girlfriend to people like Tashiro, whose charm was firing on all cylinders constantly. They seemed even more likely to get along without me than someone like Miyano. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust my friends; I knew Tashiro was a good guy. This was something different.

“You’ve just never met anyone. You don’t have any experience to base a type on. Even back in middle school you were always playing with the other boys. I don’t think I ever saw you talk to a girl.” This startling revelation from Tashiro’s friend made me and Miyano share a look. Tashiro seemed like the kind of guy

who could easily be the life of the party with boys and girls alike.

“I did too! Remember the student council? The class rep?”

“You seem like someone who would have had a girl since elementary school,” Miyano muttered in surprise, and I nodded.

“Like, the kind of thing where you don’t really know what it means to ‘go out,’ but you and some girl you’re friends with sort of end up as boyfriend and girlfriend,” I said and there were nods of agreement.

“You’re so right, and I don’t even have to envy him having a thing going on! The best part is, he’s never even held hands!” Karasubara exclaimed.

“No wonder he’s bitter!” The praise was enough to draw a wry interjection from Miyano.

“Yikes! You’re just making that up and I can *still* feel the heartbreak! Enough made-up stuff, though—I want real stories!” Hiwatari had his head in his hands.

“That’s some pretty detailed imagining, Kuresawa,” Miyano said.

“My girlfriend has me well-trained.”

“Give him the slightest chance and he’ll bring up his girlfriend!” Miyano said with a friendly smile. He looked awfully relaxed—did he realize it was his turn next?

“Okay, Miyano, you’re up. At this rate, we really will get stuck listening to Kuresawa blather,” Karasubara said.

“Huh?” said Miyano, eyes widening. He’d completely forgotten that he wasn’t just an observer in this conversation. He looked left, then right. His brow wrinkled. “Uh, my... My type. Nice people... I guess.” He took his sweet time before he started talking, but even then his speech was halting. I was sure he had just one person in mind.

Gotta be Sasaki. I mean, I understood.

“Bzzz! Tonight, no one gets away with an answer that vague!” Shirahama said, and there was a chorus of consensus. After all, Miyano was the center of attention now. We would save the best for last.

“Have you all gotten loopy just because we’re staying up a little late?! Specifics... Uh, let’s see... Someone who’s calm and collected...”

Ahh. Not something that people who didn’t know Sasaki well would associate with him. You couldn’t miss the guy—even I noticed him—and when he kept his mouth shut, it was easy to be overawed by him. But he seemed a lot more... mellow when he was with Miyano. Maybe it was the way he listened closely and nodded gamely along when Miyano spoke.

“Give us something to work with here! Let us into your heart!” said Karasubara, who had done just that. In the face of his urging, Miyano looked everywhere except at us—but there was no one willing to jump in and call a stop to his torment.

“Uhhh... Okay. I can talk about the kind of person that...that I like. Um. Someone courageous. You know? Someone who can say exactly what they’re thinking, when they’re thinking it, no matter who they’re talking to. Someone who can do things that I can’t.”

Shirahama cocked his head in an *oh-yeah?* gesture. “I never thought of you as a guy who couldn’t speak his mind, Miyano.” It was true that Miyano would speak up when he didn’t like something; he had his own opinions and wasn’t the type to get pulled along by peer pressure.

“Yeah, but that’s with my friends... It’s harder with strangers.”

“You’re not afraid of strangers! What about Hirano or whoever? Like, he’s scary-looking, but you talk to him all the time. You ask me, Miyano, you strike me as the type who, like, if you bumped into someone who needed help, you would be the one to talk to them.” Karasubara appeared to agree with Shirahama.

“Sure I would; who wouldn’t? But I couldn’t...uh, like, jump in if someone else was fighting...”

This wasn’t hypothetical anymore; this was a real example. Did Miyano realize? Tashiro, of ever sharp intuition, knew all about *that* situation.

“Yeah, I guess that would take some courage. Even just a couple of girls fighting is plenty scary.” Hiwatari nodded...then added that arguing couples

could be pretty intimidating, too.

“I’m with you. I don’t know much about couples, but it’s like...you’re fighting, but you’re also dating?” There were different kinds of fights, but Karasubara had the right idea: If you were going to speak ill of (or to) your partner, just break up with them already.

“Aww, everyone fights!”

“How would you know, Shirahama? You don’t even *have* a girlfriend!”

“Come over here and say that again!”

The three of them didn’t seem to suspect that Miyano might be talking about a *guy* who intervened in a fight between other men. We were talking about our “types,” after all. Even if we were going by real-world experience, who would imagine that this story came straight off school grounds?

Hold on. But that would mean—

“Hey... That sounds a lot like Sasa—”

I slapped my hand over Tashiro’s mouth before he could run it any further, but I was a little late. *Crap!* Feeling a prickle of panic, I looked around. Miyano was blushing a bit, but that was it. Well, that was to be expected when we were talking about love. No one else seemed to have noticed what Tashiro was saying or be bothered by it. None of them realized he had hit the nail on the head.

“What’s the deal?” Tashiro grumbled.

“Nothing,” I whispered back. I kept my voice low, thinking it would be too conspicuous to jump right back into the conversation. Tashiro seemed to take the hint from me and stayed quiet, too.

“All this talk about fighting—it was Sasaki who saved your ass, right, Kuresawa?” Tashiro whispered to me. It was the obvious leap to make.

“I mean, yeah. But just... Miyano didn’t actually *say* that, and what if that wasn’t what he meant? Wouldn’t want to suggest otherwise.”

“Yeah, I guess not.” My tortured attempt at an explanation produced an immediate nod from Tashiro. In his mind, it couldn’t possibly be a bad thing to

mention another guy, which was sort of awesome in its own way, but it also just about gave me a heart attack.

I didn't think Miyano could stand to have outsiders dragged into this subject at that moment. Even if the other guys meant to be encouraging, it would only put more pressure on someone who was already struggling to work out exactly what it meant to "date someone."

I settled back down in my futon and heaved a sigh. *I wish we could all accept facts as easily as Tashiro.*

The person Miyano liked... No matter how you looked at it, I was sure Tashiro was right. Someone kind and easygoing and who shared Miyano's interests—or at least tried to. He was courageous, too, and would jump into the middle of a fight if he had to. I could only think of one person in Miyano's orbit who fit all those criteria.

I really wished Miyano would go and tell our senior classmate how he felt, right now. I already had a girlfriend, so I was aware of the feelings that could appear and the ways a relationship could change only after one partner started that conversation.

The way Miyano was being so careful about this, it suggested he'd already had things go south with someone he liked. But surely it wasn't Sasaki, I thought. It was a kind of despondency that was difficult for me to understand, as the person who had been the one to confess how he felt. By telling my girlfriend I cared about her, by giving my feelings form, to my surprise, those feelings became even firmer and stronger.

Then again, Miyano seemed likely to get swept away by such a person, so maybe taking his time and thinking things through was the right thing to do. Although he didn't strike me as the kind to give up so easily, even if he decided that it was probably futile.

I mean, this was just my guess, but I thought from the time Miyano started lending him BL manga, Sasaki probably already valued Miyano a lot. Which meant... Well, you know. I tried to think back to when, after that point, Miyano had seemed most out of sorts. Based on the vibe I'd gotten from talking to Sasaki, it was probably right before the culture fest.

Maybe immediately before finals, ahead of summer break?

When he'd turned bright red talking on the phone—I'd bet that was Sasaki he'd been talking to. He'd blushed so hard, I could tell despite the mask covering his nose and mouth. It wasn't just a hint of red in his cheeks; it went straight up to the tops of his ears.

That marked the time when I started to see Miyano get noticeably embarrassed or lapse into thought. There was no way Sasaki had asked him out over the phone, so maybe it had been a little before that... Hmm. But then... How long had it taken for Sasaki to say how he felt? Miyano had started lending him books in the fall of our first year, so it would have been six months at a minimum, right?

Had Sasaki really been biding his time with Miyano, never telling him how he felt, but just slowly getting closer to him all that while? Maybe he was more tenacious than I'd given him credit for.

"Guess we're down to the last, and that's me," I said, leaning forward at the long-awaited moment. Some of the other guys buried themselves in their beds.

"Knock yourself out. All that's left is for the rest of us to go to sleep!" Shirahama said. He was one of the ones with his blanket pulled over his head, ready to drop off.

"You just don't want to listen," Tashiro interjected. He was sitting up, hugging his pillow, prepared to listen politely. Miyano didn't look ready to go to sleep, either; he was going to hear me out.

"Nah, it's just cold up here in these northern lands. I'm listening, trust me," Shirahama said, although he could be heard murmuring something about how nice the futon was. Funny how he could be so sarcastic but never actually offensive—no wonder he was one of Tashiro's friends.

"It all started in our third year of middle school, when my girlfriend-to-be and I were assigned to the same group for our school trip..."

Miyano could be surprisingly self-possessed, so as persistent as Sasaki might be, I thought they could still end up dating happily. In fact, maybe it was actually Sasaki who was leading Miyano around here. In my mind, though, I

already had a clear image of Miyano being the one to reach out to take Sasaki's hand.

"Huh? Is there someone outside?" Tashiro asked, cocking his head.

Karasubara sat up, hopeful that there might be something interesting going on. At the same moment, the door to our room flew open.

I jumped and my heart began to race. All of us threw ourselves under our covers, but we knew...it was already too late.

In walked our chaperone, on patrol. "It's way past lights out!"

"Aw, Teach, how could you do that? How could you fling the door open when we might be asleep?!" whined Karasubara, the instigator of our little conference.

"Sleeping with the lights on? I doubt it!"

"Well, you've got us there," I muttered. So much for Karasubara's objection.

I saw the teacher's eyes flit to the table and realized he was checking for contraband as much as wakeful students. "I can hear you kids all the way outside," he said. "Okay, go to sleep."

He was just about to hit the light switch when Tashiro jumped up. "Wait, I gotta take a leak!"

"Yeah, me too!" Shirahama said. Friends indeed.

"You goin' in there together?" someone piped up.

"Aw, shut it!" Shirahama shot back.

"Just keep it down!" the teacher snapped.

So, with much merriment on our part and much annoyance on the teacher's, the hour grew late on the first night of our school trip.

Our destination on day two was the city of Otaru. We got to make handmade music boxes, and I daresay mine came out pretty well. I decided it would make the perfect souvenir for Yuki.

Miyano definitely had his back to the wall when he found himself having to

make a music box out of assorted parts. I'd asked him to come with us to this activity because he'd done the ice-cream making with us, but I never imagined he'd be so bad at delicate work. It wasn't just the mechanical pieces, either; he labored to decorate his music box, too. When he finally finished it, he said he was going to give it to his mom as a gift.

I saw the sigh he heaved when his music box was finally safely in its case. It had now been two arduous days for him.

"Tired?" I asked.

"Yeah, a little... But I'm glad we did this. We got to pick our own songs, and I'm sure I never would've had this experience if we hadn't taken this chance."

"You looked like you were really struggling."

"You look like *you* really weren't, Kuresawa," Miyano said, giving me a cold look.

I'd picked "When You Wish upon a Star" for the song in my music box. The moment I'd seen it, I knew there was no other choice. Even though the music box was already in my backpack, I could still hear the gentle melody in my mind. That made me think of one of Yuki's favorite manga—it had a picture of the night sky on the cover. The carefully rendered constellation Orion on the front had made me think maybe it was a story about the stars, but when I read it, it turned out to be about a guy who had moles in the shape of the constellation.

The story went that the first thing to draw the protagonist's interest wasn't feelings of love but curiosity about the other man's back, where, supposedly, the constellation Orion could be seen in his moles. Their relationship went from there.

I was amazed by the creativity on display—how someone could start with an idea like that and turn it into BL. The genre had shocking depths, I realized. It was that zeal to turn anything and everything into BL. Sometimes Yuki and I would be in the middle of a conversation, and I would find her leaving me behind for some flight of boys-love fancy.

And again, I saw the cosmos in the black depths of her hair, the night sky shimmering in her eyes.

Lost in those thoughts, I found myself thinking, just for a second, that I should have gone ahead and taken the picture of the pondering Miyano. Because Sasaki, despite going to the same school and even having been to the same place, couldn't be there with Miyano at that moment.

As for Tashiro, he'd decided to do a different activity.

"I'm gonna do glassblowing!" he announced, and I was surprised to realize that the group he was going with didn't include most of his usual entourage. He was chatting affably with them, even though they didn't seem to share a lot of interests—his social skills were leagues beyond mine.

I saw a lot of lovely handmade glass items and pored over them until the last moment, but I decided to put off buying anything until I came here with my girlfriend. Any purchase would be with us for a long time—I didn't want to pick something based purely on my own tastes.

We checked out the shops, which occupied a relatively small area, and grabbed something to eat, and before we knew it, the sun was going down. There was no outdoor evening program planned for that night, and I'd been disappointed to think I might not get to see Otaru's famous night sky, but it got plenty dark even before dinner.

I snapped a selfie against the background of the beautifully lit canals. I'd taken a few during the daylight hours, too, but for those I deliberately left a large space to one side of me. I told Yuki that I pictured her standing there.

On day three we moved on to our next destination, Hakodate, and took in the sights. We would also spend day four there, and that was our last stop on the trip.

The day after, we would mostly be in transit—and we weren't allowed to make our way to the airport our own, so this would be our last chance to buy souvenirs. I'd been careful not to buy boxes of treats during the trip so that they wouldn't weigh down my luggage, but that also meant I wanted plenty of time to shop for souvenirs in Hakodate before we left.

Miyano was bringing his music box for his parents, and he planned to grab some "Marui Koibito" sweets for the other members of the Disciplinary

Committee. But now I found him muttering to himself over the treats. He was thinking hard; his mind, as they said, was elsewhere.

“Even not counting *that*, I owe him a lot... You know, he likes drinks. I see him having hot chocolate all the time. Maybe there’s some kind of candy that tastes like hot chocolate... And he does like sweet things. Maybe Otaru would have had better choices. They have all those flagship stores...”

I sympathized with him, but we’d traveled too far. Getting back to Otaru wouldn’t be easy.

“Huh, so Sasaki’s a hot chocolate guy,” I said. The words were out of my mouth almost before I knew I was saying them.

Miyano jerked and looked at me. “Huh? What was that?” He really had been concentrating. His eyes were wide and he looked startled.

I assumed the “that” that Miyano had talked about “not counting” was his feelings of love. Probably. Not that he’d said so.

“You were talking to yourself out loud.”

“God, that’s embarrassing.” Miyano looked studiously at the ground.

“Didn’t know he liked cocoa.”

“Er, uh, yeah. I’ve seen him drinking it.” Miyano sounded nonchalant, but what a guy was drinking wasn’t the sort of thing you normally paid attention to.

“Huh! You’re a sharp observer, eh?”

“You think so?” Miyano shook his head, but his expression immediately shifted to me: His eyes widened and his face flushed. Apparently, he hadn’t even realized how closely he’d been watching Sasaki.

“Okay if I tease you a little more?” I said.

“Don’t ask if you know the answer is *no*, Kuresawa,” he said. Pretty forcefully, too—probably trying to hide his embarrassment. He really took it seriously when you poked fun at him, though; it was better to just apologize.

“Sorry. Couldn’t help myself,” I said.

“Yeah, well, this isn’t...what you’re thinking.”

“I think it’s *exactly* what I’m thinking.”

Miyano was standing there struggling to riddle out what Sasaki would like best, what would make him happy. When I pointed that out, though, Miyano just gave me a doubtful look.

I left Miyano to his fretting and went about doing my own shopping. I needed souvenirs for Yuki’s family as well as mine, not to mention the stuff my seniors in club had asked me to pick up. Hokkaido’s locally made specialties were delicious, but as I looked around I realized that trying to accommodate everyone would result in me having the same things everyone else had in their baskets.

Maybe chocolates would be a good choice, since I was going to split it up so many ways. They were surprisingly cheap, and there was plentiful variety—but that posed problems of its own. I could only fit so much in my luggage. Then again, as a last resort, I could always have something shipped...

“*Please*, sir?” said a familiar voice. I turned to see Tashiro with his head dipped toward a teacher in an imploring bow. What was going on?

“Absolutely not.”

On closer inspection, I saw Tashiro was trying to buy some sort of wooden gun. From its polished surface to its meticulous construction, it was tailor-made to entice the avid shopper.

“I won’t take it out of its bag until we’re back home! I promise!” Tashiro said. What was he, a kid?

“Well... If you promise. But if I see that thing at the hotel tonight, I’m confiscating it. No warnings.”

“You won’t, sir!”

That reminded me of someone on my middle school trip who’d wanted a wooden sword. It also reminded me that I’d failed to acquire a souvenir for myself. I’d bought a set of postcards at the hotel we’d stayed in the previous day showing the night sky, but I’d sent one to Yuki with some seasonally appropriate greetings and I was giving some with presents, so they didn’t seem likely to last. Maybe I could afford to get one more set. There was still plenty of

time.

Somehow, the Hokkaido souvenir corner was like a theme park—I never got tired of looking at all the choices. Now, what would Yuki like best?

I gave up on Miyano, who was still mumbling to himself, and went to pay for my items. The line for the cash register was getting longer and longer.

Just then, I heard another voice I thought I recognized. “Oh, someone gave me one of these once. So they really sell them here!”

I hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but when someone is talking right next to you, it’s hard not to hear them.

“Hey, that’s the thing you’ve got on your phone. And it’s a limited edition—they only sell it here! Wow, it really exists! So that person you like got that for you?”

Intrigued by the mention of something limited-edition, I sneaked a peek at the shelf to find two guys looking at cell phone charms in the shape of a weird-looking dog. It had a massive head, with a sort of afterthought of a body... It *was* a dog, wasn’t it?

“Yeah, that’s right,” said the tall guy. I thought he’d been in my car on the ropeway... I was pretty sure. In the daylight, he looked more muscular than he had that night; he definitely seemed like an athlete. His back was to me, so I couldn’t see who it was, but more striking than his build was his gentle voice.

“So what’s with this Hirano guy anyway? He’s cool *and* kind *and* sweet? I can hardly picture an older guy who would give someone a weird-ass thing like this.”

Hirano again?

“Huh...”

If he was older, did that make him an upperclassman? And if he’d gotten his hands on something that was only sold here, did that mean he’d come to Hokkaido—on a school trip, say? And this guy was supposed to be really cool? My brain was going a mile a minute, processing the keywords I’d picked up, and all of them seemed to point to just one conclusion.

No. Couldn't be... Could it? I resisted the idea that it could be the upperclassman named Hirano who I knew.



“He’s supposed to be blond and handsome, right? I’d like to get a look at him!” the second guy said.

Blond? Blond! It all matched up too perfectly...

As I was thinking, the line was moving, carrying me away from the two guys with the phone charms.

“Hmm... I think maybe you’ve seen him in the mornings,” the first guy said.

“Mornings? You mean, like, on television?! Is he an actor?!”

“Yeah, no.”

If they were talking about the Hirano I was thinking of, then what was this about mornings? Mornings... Greetings... What else happened in the mornings? Sometimes the Disciplinary Committee ran uniform inspections. Was that it? No, that was stretching it. Those inspections didn’t happen very often. But then again... I couldn’t reject an idea just because it seemed too convenient.

Anyone who went to our school would have seen this guy Hirano around in the mornings—you couldn’t miss him. He had bleached hair even though he was supposedly one of the people administering the inspections; it would make anyone do a double take.

Have Yuki and Miyano given me a case of BL brain? I thought.

Suddenly, it was my turn in line. The clerk looked more than used to dealing with customers with a mountain of purchases; they separated the various souvenirs into bags showing the logo of each producer without a word.

With that, I was all done with souvenirs. I glanced around the store, wondering idly if Miyano was still frozen with indecision. That was when I noticed the two guys I’d overheard in line had moved to a shelf near the register.

“Hey, they sell earrings here. Is he still wearing the ones you got him?” the buddy asked.

“Uh-huh,” the athlete replied.

I felt a shock: That did it. Hirano... He wore earrings, didn’t he?

Was this really right? Should I be taking a naughty little imagining like this seriously?

I wasn't sure, but I found I couldn't get the idea out of my head, not under my own power. I wanted to talk it over with Yuki, but I needed a cooling-off period before my assumptions solidified into unshakable certainty. It was a scary thought.

I stood near the register, pinned in place by this maelstrom of fantasizing and worse, until suddenly Miyano was talking to me. He'd finished paying for his own stuff.

"Don't usually see a furrow on *your* brow. What's up?" he asked. So he hadn't heard anything just now? He certainly didn't look like it. It was almost outlandish to me.

"It's nothing. I just sort of...feel like you've brainwashed me," I said.

He squinted at me but didn't seem to guess what I'd been thinking about. "I haven't brainwashed anybody," he said.

"And that's pretty much how it went. I know it might have been a stretch to get the BL in there, but anyway, that was my experience."

Yuki had been listening to me so raptly that I'd forgotten the time and just blathered on. My coffee was ice-cold. If I stuck around too long, I would tire her out, so I knew I had to make my exit.

I was afraid maybe I'd massaged the story a bit too much trying to make it something recognizably BL, and whatever Yuki had been hoping for, I was sure I must have disappointed her. But she looked at me very seriously and said, "No, I think you solved the mystery. I think it's true."

"You don't think you just *want* it to be true?" I asked.

"Maybe... But from everything you said, Tasuku, I think it's the only possible conclusion! Although, I can't say I *don't* want it to be true..."

She smiled brightly. I guess I'd succeeded in connecting with the world she loved so much, if only in the smallest way.



CHAPTER
3

WHITE DAY PREP &
A PROPOSAL.

On the last day of final exams, I decided to walk home with Tashiro and Miyano. The upperclassmen had already had their graduation ceremony, so technically we were the oldest students on campus, but it didn't really feel like it.

It was chilly, as if the seasons were trying to wind back the clock, and the lingering tightness in my shoulders was a constant reminder of the stress of exams.

"Finally done! Ahh, the sweet taste of freedom!" Tashiro exclaimed, stretching his arms toward the sky. Then I heard him go "Erk!" as his chair almost tipped over from his excess of enthusiasm. Somehow he managed to keep himself upright—he really was athletic.

He stood up, slid his chair in, and stretched again. "Man, I was freaking out!"

I understood how he felt, but I also wondered if the lack of activity—clubs and sports teams were on break during finals—was giving him all this energy. His movements were even more exaggerated than usual.

"I hear you. But it was just four days," I said, as I put some handouts from the closing ceremony in a folder.

Tashiro shook his head emphatically. "There was a weekend in there, so it was basically like a week of tests!"

Gee, and here I would have thought he might be thankful for a break in the middle of all the test-taking.

"I could understand that...from someone who had spent that time studying," Miyano groaned, much to Tashiro's dismay.

I decided to take advantage of this lull to text my girlfriend. Exams over! I wrote. She'd told me she enjoyed even simple communications like that; they made her really feel like the new season was here.

"I did study! With my friends, at their houses," Tashiro objected. He and I hurried to grab our coats; we were a step behind Miyano, who was already pulling his on.

"Huh. You do that? I've only ever studied at my girlfriend's house," I said.

“You do homework on your *dates*?” Tashiro said, fussing with his hood.

“Sure we do. Sometimes she even asks me to help her with stuff. Dates are no fun if you’re just putting off stuff you have to do anyway. And she feels the same way.”

“Give him half a chance and he’ll start in on the girlfriend talk,” said Miyano.

“Well, yeah. How could I not brag?” I said. Miyano was trying to sound disinterested, but I expected him to be just as eager to boast as I was before long...

Then again, maybe he realized that the Sasaki he described to me was someone only he could see. Or maybe he didn’t?

We worked our way out into the hallway, trading friendly hellos with a stream of classmates. I could hear some people comparing answers and others making plans for some post-exam fun.

“Think we should check our answers with each other, too?” Miyano said.

“Nah! Don’t wanna!” replied Tashiro.

“That’s what I thought.”

I listened to Miyano and Tashiro chattering while I checked the text I’d just gotten from Yuki. Congrats! she’d written. Great work! I texted back a quick thanks. I would call her later.

As we reached the stairs, Tashiro really went into overdrive, so Miyano and I gave him plenty of space. He started by taking the stairs two at a time, but when we reached the landing, he flung himself into the air. “Five steps in one go!” he cried.

“He’s gonna get himself hurt one of these days...”

Five steps might have seemed like a lot, but Tashiro could have cleared eight at a time without too much trouble. He looked like a grade-school kid, bounding along.

“Oh, hey. When I was studying, I came across this question. What’s it mean to ask your girlfriend to make miso soup for you every morning?” Tashiro said.

What did that have to do with our exams? Miyano and I shared a look.

“What kind of questions were you expecting on this test?” Miyano said with open disdain.

I decided to throw him a bone. “The complete lack of context is what makes the question so...*Tashiro-esque*.”

“That’s a non sequitur if I ever heard one,” Miyano said, but he smiled. I guess Tashiro wasn’t the only one feeling the weight off his shoulders now that tests were over.

“No, no, it’s not a test thing. While I was studying at my friend’s house, we were playing this old video game for a break, and the miso thing came up in the ending.”

“You played all the way to the end as a break?” I piped up. I didn’t mean to poke holes in Tashiro’s story; it just happened.

“Studying via games?” Miyano seemed flabbergasted.

“Sure. You’ve never done that?” Tashiro said.

“Never. I read a bit of manga once in a while, that’s all. Anyway, this thing about making miso soup came up in your game?”

“Yeah! Talk about out of left field, right?”

“Maybe not,” Miyano said. “It might make sense—it’s kind of a stock phrase in romantic scenes.” The explanation seemed to come easily for him; it suggested to me that we’d wandered into his field of expertise. I decided to sit back and let him handle this one.

“Romance?” Tashiro parroted. True, he didn’t seem like the kind to be super big on lovey-dovey moments. Which was funny, considering he probably would have been a pretty popular guy at a coed school. More’s the pity he attended an all-boys school.

“Like I said, it’s sort of a set expression. Who makes miso for you every day at home? Usually a member of your family, right? So it’s basically a roundabout way of asking someone to marry you.”

“So it’s, like, proposing?” It still didn’t seem to be quite clicking for Tashiro.

“Yep.”

“Man, that makes *no* sense to me! For one thing, we don’t even have miso every day at my house. If I want some, I just grab a packet of the instant stuff and boil up some water—on my own. I guess sometimes my folks ask me to make some for them, too, and I grab two packets.”

This was something unexpected. So Tashiro was the serious type at home. Dare I call him...domestic?

“Huh! Wait, isn’t it actually expensive to make two people’s worth?” Miyano asked. His unforgiving perspective was interesting in its own way.

“Sure is. If that goes on for a couple days, my mom is like, it would be cheaper just to make a bunch at once! She always says laziness is the root of wasting money. And I’m like, I know that! But I keep making that soup.”

It sure took all kinds to make a family. The point was, to Tashiro, miso soup was something he made for himself.

“Well, I guess you could say, *Marry me ’cause I’ll make miso for you every day*,” Miyano said. You know, that wasn’t a bad way to propose. A bit sentimental, sure, but I liked the image it conveyed of sitting down to eat together each and every day.

Tashiro, though, was shaking his head. “Wouldn’t you get sick of miso every day?”

That brought me back to reality. *Could you get sick of miso soup?* I suppose it was possible. In which case, rethinking the terms of this proposal would be called for. But I liked the general idea.

“Would you?” Miyano said, pondering. “If the person you loved made it for you, wouldn’t you be happy?”

Hmmm. Maybe it was just another way of being head over heels.

“So you’re Team Make Me Miso, Miyano?” Tashiro said.

“I think I’d rather be the one doing the making... I mean, notwithstanding my skills in the kitchen.”

Yeah, he’d been a clear and present danger during our cooking lessons. This

wasn't a matter of turning a burner up a bit too high—there'd been risks to life and limb involved. I wanted to implore him to make sure there was safety equipment around before he turned that stove on. It had been bad enough watching him use a knife, but when there was fire involved, I couldn't stand by anymore.

“Eh, real miso is pretty much beyond me, too,” Tashiro said, but he was being modest. He had a way with activities that required some finesse; with a recipe to work from, I figured he wouldn't have any problems. Probably. He was something of a jack-of-all-trades—the real problem was whether he would read the recipe.

We traded our slippers for our regular shoes at the door. Tashiro was complaining about how hungry he was. Because we'd been talking about food, I was sure.

“Say, Miyano, what are you gonna do about White Day?” Tashiro asked. He made the question sound casual, but Miyano was caught completely off guard.

“What do you mean, what am I going to do?” he said.

It was, again, very Tashiro-like to come right out and ask something like that. I was sort of impressed.

“I mean, the third-years have graduated, so they won't come to school. You gonna go to his house?” Tashiro added that it sounded like fun.

“Why would you ask that?” said Miyano, shrinking back.

Tashiro seemed genuinely perplexed. “Well, I know you have some chocolate you want to give out. Like, really want.”

“Well, so do you, right, Kuresawa?” Miyano asked, turning to me in distress.

“Me? Sure.”

“Coulda guessed *that*,” Tashiro said.

“You wanna hear about it? I don't think I can finish telling you before we reach the station. How about we stop by a restaurant somewhere, get some drinks...” I said. If my experience could help them, then by all means.

Then again, maybe lunch was on at my house. Another time, then.

“You’ll talk forever! Well... But maybe it might be nice to chat sometime,” Tashiro said. When sports and clubs started up again, it would be hard to find time to hang out together after school, especially with Tashiro being captain of his team. Anyway, I would be going to see my girlfriend.

“We’ll have to find a chance sometime,” I said. “So, Miyano, what *are* you going to do about White Day?”

“You too?” he groaned, his brow wrinkling. He’d probably thought he was safe after the change of subject.

“Frankly, I think we’re the best people you could talk to. We know this upperclassman of yours ourselves,” I said.

Miyano swallowed hard. “Okay, true. But...”

“You’re embarrassed,” I volunteered.

“I just *know* you’re enjoying this!”

“Hey, it’s okay. It is kind of funny,” Tashiro said. If he was trying to offer an olive branch, he wasn’t doing a very good job. Miyano’s shoulders slumped.

“I’m gonna give him something back...to repay him. I mean, I want to...” He trailed off, looking cowed by all the people around us.

But... Hmm. All right. So Miyano wanted to repay Sasaki’s Valentine’s Day gift on White Day.

It wasn’t too long after final exams, and we were almost done working out White Day plans. Miyano and I were going to the library to do some research when I noticed a poster and came to a halt in front of the bulletin board on the stair landing.

MAKE YOUR OWN WHITE DAY GIFTS! it said in big letters. This was followed by a brief description and instructions on how to apply to participate. It looked like something that one of the home ec teachers was doing voluntarily for the students. How long had this been here? I was chagrined to say I didn’t remember.

“White Day...,” I mumbled. That got Miyano’s attention—he’d walked right

past the poster.

“Huh?”

“This might be just the thing! You should do this, Miyano.”

They were only going to make cookies, and the poster said beginner chefs were welcome. It seemed perfect for him.

“Huh, I didn’t know they were offering this. Is the Cooking Club putting this on?”

“Doesn’t look like it. It just has the name of a teacher. If there was a club involved, they’d probably want you to apply with the club president.”

“Good point. A club probably doesn’t have the budget for something like this.”

“So,” I said pointedly. “You gonna do it?”

“Do I have to decide *now*?”

“I’d like to give my girlfriend something. It’d sure be nice to have some company when I’m baking cookies,” I said. I hoped that would make it easier for him to say yes. Not that a couple who were dating needed an “assistant” to help with something like this, but Miyano seemed like he could use the extra push to get out of his comfort zone.

“Hrm, well... I’d like to give Sasaki something, too. I don’t want to just tag along; I’d better actually do it.”

“Yeah?” I said, somewhat surprised. I was impressed that Miyano could be so upfront about those things now.

“Hey, uh, Kuresawa, do you think you could go on ahead?” Miyano asked. I said sure and went on my way. I guess he had something to do. Well, I didn’t have club or anything, so I had nothing but time.

I got going again, jogging down the stairs, but a few minutes later I realized I’d forgotten my pencil case. It had been in my gym bag when we changed classrooms, and I didn’t think I’d ever gotten it out again. I figured I had time to grab it before Miyano finished whatever he was doing.

I started jogging back up the stairs—but then I heard Miyano’s voice from the hall. It sounded like he was right by the staircase.

“Hey, um, about White Day. I’m not gonna be able to make stuff with you...”

It sounded like he was talking to Sasaki. Was this phone call what he’d had to do? So they’d been planning to make something together?

I hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but if I walked away now, the question of what was going on would gnaw at me. I wouldn’t tell my girlfriend about this, of course—it was just an accident.

“Sure! Um, I do...want to thank you, but, uh... I’m afraid I won’t be able to keep it a secret, so let me just go ahead and say it. The school is doing some sort of cooking class for White Day, and I’m gonna make something there. I won’t tell you what it is yet. But just, uh, I’d like to give it to you on White Day, so if we could meet after school that day...?”



Miyano sounded racked with nerves. So this was the voice the person he was dating heard. I was seized for a second time by the feeling that I was listening in on something I shouldn't be.

"Hey, sure. Can't wait! Think I'll make something myself."

Whether I felt bad about it or not, the silence in the hallway made Sasaki's voice on the other end of the line clearly audible.

"Uh, okay, then... Do something that doesn't involve flour, butter, sugar, and eggs. So we don't make the same thing!"

That was pretty much as good as admitting he would be making cookies.

"Ha-ha-ha! Sure, no problem." I was sure Sasaki had to know what Miyano was referring to, but he didn't say anything about it.

Feeling that it would be *really* wrong of me to listen to any more of the conversation, I sneaked back to the staircase, carefully avoiding loud footsteps. As for my pencil case...eh, it could wait.

I decided not to tell my girlfriend that I would be handmaking something for her. Just a little surprise—I was sure she would love it. I was confident that she wouldn't be upset even though I was technically hiding something from her. Miyano had probably fessed up because he figured he couldn't manage that. But there was nothing to feel guilty about!

Still, I could sense how happy he was when he told Sasaki about it, and I was glad they seemed to have the same friendly relationship they'd shared before they were dating. I wondered—if I told Yuki what I was going to do, the way Miyano had, would she giggle and tell me she "couldn't wait"?

Yeah... Yeah, probably.

Oh, I really wanted to see her react that way. Maybe I should go ahead and tell her the next time I saw her—I could tell myself Miyano made me do it. I quickly thought better of the idea, though. I wanted this to be a surprise. I would just have to keep it to myself.

Next year, though? Maybe I would tell her.

I was eager to see all of Yuki's facial expressions.

So White Day arrived.

Even though our lesson was explicitly about making White Day treats, the teacher didn't inquire as to who we were planning to give our cookies to. Everyone acted like this was just an ordinary cooking class.

It was nice that even here at a boys' school, no one made any crude jokes about giving girls chocolates on White Day. The way everyone was cool with it quickly transformed an initially awkward atmosphere into one of banter and friendly chat.

There were about ten of us there, a mix of first-and second-years, and we each baked our own cookies rather than forming groups. We could even pick where we wanted to work, so Miyano, Tashiro, and I all set up shop at the same workstation.

Our instructor, one of the home ec teachers, looked thrilled that students were showing an interest in cooking. I even started to think that maybe the White Day thing had just been an excuse. It so happened that the teacher had offered the same activity for Valentine's Day, but no one had signed up and the idea flopped.

"I almost cried!" the teacher said—kind of jokingly, but I got the distinct sense that it might have been true.

The teacher did most of the instructing, with one student helping out as an assistant—Niibashi, a second-year from Class A. I knew him for his refined good looks.

In principle, we used ingredients that we brought and followed a recipe supplied by the teacher, but people who wanted to could do a recipe of their own choosing instead. The teacher would still give you advice and help, which was what they spent most of their time doing after an explanation and a quick demonstration.

"Best to start out simple!" Miyano declared, choosing to follow the instructor's recipe. And indeed, the ingredients were easy to measure out and it was overall a perfect starting point for a beginner. Miyano imitated what the teacher had done in the demonstration, and the cookie cutter made it easy to

cut as many cookies as he wanted. He didn't make any mistakes worth mentioning, and it went great.

Or it should have.

"These don't look right..."

Miyano's cookies were slightly burnt but somehow still seemed soft. When he pulled the parchment paper off the baking tray, they sort of flopped over. I was no baking expert myself, and I had no idea what could have caused that.

"I don't get it... Did I not heat the oven to the right temperature?"

"Nah, that can't be it. Maybe the flour was lumpy?" I suggested. Miyano shrugged, flummoxed.

"Gimme one," said Tashiro, and without waiting for an okay, he popped one of the still scorching cookies into his mouth. "Hey, that's...not bad," he said, but not in a way that inspired much confidence.

"I was planning on nice, crunchy cookies. This isn't quite what I pictured..." Miyano was defeated, and I didn't know what to say to him. Tashiro's and my baking had come out just fine, so words of sympathy escaped me.

We were surprised to hear someone say, "Mind if I have a taste?" It was Niibashi, who was going around to each workstation. Miyano looked up, dazed for a second, but then he seemed to remember why Niibashi was around and nodded.

"Oh, yeah. Sure, go ahead."

The expression on his face had been—well, not quite what you might call love at first sight. It was close to the kind of look you gave someone when you saw them in town and were trying to remember whether you knew them. I would have to ask him about it later.

"There might be a bit too much butter in these. Did you measure it out?"

Miyano gulped at the very specific suggestion. "I brought 200 grams of butter, so I sort of eyeballed half of it. And then when I was working the dough, the flour just didn't seem to want to mix in, so I added a little more..."

He trailed off. Ah, so he hadn't measured carefully—and then he'd changed

the amounts. I couldn't help muttering, "Geez!"

"Hey, it's just oil. When it cools off, it'll have the texture you're going for," Niibashi said kindly. Miyano looked very relieved.

"Thanks...", he said.

"Lucky you!" chimed in Tashiro, pleased.



*

We wrapped and packaged our creations, cleaned up, and made our way out of the room. I heard a long sigh. It could have come from any of us—or possibly all of us. It was a combination of the sense of a job well done and relief from the jangling nerves of doing something unfamiliar.

One nice thing about the little lesson was that, unlike our usual cooking classes, we got to take home pretty much everything we made. I kept a careful hold on the paper bag I'd been given for my packaged cookies, making sure they didn't get shaken up.

We were at the front door when I said to Miyano, "Hey, I saw you looking at Niibashi like you were gonna burn a hole through him. What's up with that?" I wasn't exactly bothered by it, but the image wouldn't quite leave my mind.

"Oh, uh, nothing. I just think he has a pretty face..."

"Listen, you—"

Miyano was quick to object, "That's not what I mean! I feel like I've seen him somewhere before."

"Ahh, I get it."

"Well, we do go to the same school," Tashiro added. I found myself oddly relieved.

"By the way, Tashiro, are those cookies for you? Or are you going to give them to your family?" I asked. He didn't have an object of his affections to bestow them on.

Tashiro shook his head. "I'm gonna give 'em to the people at the bathhouse. I owe it to 'em. The old dudes and grandmas are always giving me treats and stuff, so—well, I'm not exactly paying them back for Valentine's Day, but..."

"Huh!" What was he, their grandson?

I changed my shoes as we chatted, and then Miyano piped up, "Uh, so, I'm in a bit of a hurry. I've gotta go."

Ah, meeting Sasaki at home? Tashiro and I walked Miyano halfway to his

destination, until our routes diverged, but I spent the whole time thinking about the phone call I'd overheard and suffering pangs of conscience.

What does it mean to propose? I'd pondered the question over the past few weeks. I pondered it now as our friend hurried off on his White Day errand and as I watched people pass here, there, and everywhere on the street.

Tashiro's offhand question had become something of a riddle for me. I was pretty sure I wanted to be with my girlfriend all our lives, and I had said as much—but had I proposed? Not really, I didn't think.

Sure, miso soup or cookies could carry a message of love, but they weren't the only way to communicate those feelings. Food just got to the heart of the idea that you wanted to accumulate an ever-growing collection of daily moments with the other person.

Ahh, but there had to be more to it. Didn't proposing implicitly include the things that excited you, a life you dreamed of? It was hard to put into words, but you were seeking to obtain a life that, at that moment, you still only imagined.

I was afraid that if I tried to sound too cool doing it, I would just make an idiot of myself. If I was too hyperaware of myself, my girlfriend might even sound cooler than me when she answered. After all, there was nothing cooler than when the person you love proposes to you, right?

The cookies in their paper bag were light, but they had an unmistakable weight, too.

I took the same train I always did, but from the moment I came out of the wicket at the station, nothing felt quite ordinary. Even the street on the walk to my girlfriend's house seemed blindingly bright.

I want this to go on forever, I thought. The fun, the certainty, the love, the feeling that I wanted to take her in my arms that very moment... Imagine going home to the same house every day, feeling that. How wonderful would that be?

Maybe I don't need to fancy it up. I thought of how Miyano had tackled White Day head-on the other day. Sasaki had seemed really happy about his stumbling but earnest phone call.

Maybe you didn't need to act cool or have everything under control. You just needed to let them know how much you cared.

There was only one thing I could say as I handed Yuki the cookies: "Can I make a reservation for a proposal?"

"Wow! Thanks! I mean... Wow!" She was a little confused but grinned happily.

"I've got to get through college entrance exams, but once I do, I'm going to stop and give some real thought to my plans for the future. So until then, don't let anyone propose to you, all right?"

She started to laugh. "Ha-ha... Wow! Ha-ha-ha! Sure, Tasuku—yes! Do what you have to do."

She really did love to laugh. I felt like I'd seen more and more of her smiles and laughter since we'd started dating. And although this wouldn't be for a while, I was certain that the house we would share together in the future would be filled with our joy and laughter, too.



I sat up in bed and checked the time on my phone. It was just about noon.

I lay back down.

When Miya had first called me to change our White Day plans, I hadn't been so sure about it, but when I learned he was going to be baking something for me, well, that piqued my interest. Normally you'd let that, like, be a surprise for someone, right? Especially when you were dating. But he's such a straight shooter, he told me everything, right down to the fact that it was going to be handmade.

I'd been drawn to the way he didn't hide anything since before we started dating. Before he started opening up to me. The way he never kept secrets, even the way he'd let me in on his worries and confusion when I was waiting for his answer—it made me feel all warm inside.

Sure, sometimes it was rough not being able to take my eyes off him, but then again, sometimes it was hard to *look* him in the eyes—like after I'd nearly lost control of myself. I felt like I'd sullied our perfectly nice time together.

Even if I just brushed his arm, he understood why I was reaching out.

But even knowing, he found he couldn't bring himself to stop me. It was like that when we bumped into that middle school classmate at the station, or when he cross-dressed at the culture festival. I knew it was silly, but I just wanted to keep him all to myself, even though I knew that threw him off.

I thought I'd learned from everything with my sister how much you can hurt someone by letting your feelings take over your actions, but I guess I hadn't grown much after all. It sucked to be confronted so starkly with my own immaturity. Each time it happened, I would get down on myself; even though I could never quite seem to figure out how to say it, each and every day I cherished Miya more and more.

It was frightening to come close to breaking something that meant so much to me. I could still feel it—the tears on my cheeks when I'd thought I'd wrecked everything, only to hear those words: *I like you, too*.

I could still feel it, right there in my heart: the warmth that had blossomed the day he'd screwed up his courage and given me his answer. I remembered how

shallow my breathing was, how my fingers felt numb and distant, like they weren't even mine. I had my hand to my mouth the whole time, so you would have thought my breath would keep my fingers warm, but no. They were cold, until the moment my hand touched his.

Every moment had felt like an eternity, until Miya—like he always did—looked me square in the eye. I'd felt joy and kindness radiating through me.

The moment we affirmed that we felt the same way about each other and the moment my cold fingers intertwined with his both happened in the same place—at the park near my house. Honestly? Every time I passed that park, I remembered our first kiss. Every time.

It's probably about time for Miya to be getting back, I thought, then wondered what I should do. Should I go meet him? I dithered. He'd said he would come to my house after class, and that I should wait here, but the truth was, I could hardly contain my excitement.

I wanted to hang out and wait for him to get here. I wanted to know what it felt like to answer the door when he rang the bell. But at the same time, it was killing me to have all this time on my hands. I'd already finished making my treats for him, so I could lie here until he showed up, for all it mattered.

Seriously, what should I do?

Miya had said he was going to make me something with flour, butter, sugar, and eggs. Which meant cookies, most likely.

I was surprised they were offering some kind of cooking lesson at school. I didn't remember anything like that when I was there. Well, okay, maybe I missed it. (There were a lot of things I hadn't noticed.) Or maybe it was one of the new teachers who'd come up with the idea.

I'd only just graduated, and it didn't seem like the school was very different from how I remembered it. Yet...things I knew had changed ever so slightly—into things I didn't know so well. Was that sad? I hadn't felt sad when I'd graduated from middle school.

I guess I really had fun in high school.

And Miya had been there, of course.

But I knew that wasn't all there was to it.

Well, for now I might as well clean my room. It wasn't that messy, but I didn't have anything else to do.

I decided to start with the area around my bed. I picked up the first thing within arm's reach: the graduation album from the shelf on my sideboard. I'd simply left it there so far, but maybe I should put it away.

I'd seen other people open this book, but I hadn't touched it myself since I'd gotten it. Perhaps I'd take a quick look.

I opened to a random page and found myself looking at a list of club profiles. I spotted Hirano in the corner of a picture for the Astronomy Club. Wait... Had he been in that club? That wasn't how I remembered it. But here he was in the book, so he must have shown up. I thought I remembered he was pretty tight with some of the underclassmen in that club, too.

The younger guys always seemed to like him. Including Miya. Hirano himself never really got it—he was always talking about how scary he looked to people or whatever—but it didn't matter to our juniors. They liked him just the same.

I'd thought about joining a club my first year. My sister told me I might as well try something while I was in high school, and I figured she was right. There was definitely a part of me that pushed back, like, *I didn't come to high school just to be in a club!* But I hadn't really done any extracurricular stuff in middle school, and on some level I was eager to make up for lost time.

I'd taken a look at the brochure about the various clubs you could join and noticed they had a Cooking Club. I poked my head in once or twice—not even enough to be considered a probationary club member. Mostly it was three guys in the home ec room who shot the breeze while they cooked. It seemed like they were having a lot of fun, but the chatty atmosphere wasn't really my thing, and I dropped out again without ever talking to them. Needless to say, I didn't join. So much for my memories of club life.

I closed the album and laid it down on the shelf, but it was too big and poked out a little. But it was too tall to fit upright.

Maybe if I'd joined the club, I would have experienced other new feelings. Like,

I make cakes, but I'm self-taught. Maybe in that Cooking Club, I would have had a chance to learn from a real teacher.

Then again, I really didn't much enjoy talking to people while I baked. I preferred to work in silence. Except with Miya, naturally.

Valentine's Day, now that was fun.

It had been great baking together—heck, just having him nearby. It had tickled my heart. The trouble he had in the kitchen was a side of him I hadn't seen before—and adorable to boot. I couldn't get enough. I'd found myself wanting to touch those hands working so tirelessly. I'd brushed some flour off his face—and the way he couldn't quite look at me, mumbling *"I'm not very good at this,"* was delightful; the feeling of his cheek, the softness of his skin, seemed to linger on my fingertips even now.

I'd felt a warm tingle run through my fingers. I had stopped short, almost swallowed by that warmth, and Miya had looked up at me. There was a question in his eyes—like he was asking if there was anything still on his face.

I didn't say anything, though, and a second later Miya appeared to realize what I was thinking and his eyes flitted away.

"Uh..."

He'd looked back at me, his mind made up, the strength of his gaze piercing me, and I saw his lips form the word, *Sasaki*. I could only look back at him, wondering if he realized how I was drawn to those eyes, how my heart trembled in my chest.

We were baking, so it didn't go any further than that, but if we hadn't been—
Um. Yeah. Maybe it was time to go.

Having too much time to kill led the mind to some weird places.

Locking the door to my house made it sink in; there was no one else there.

The thought wouldn't leave me alone as I walked away from the front door. If anything, every step made it more concrete. My sister was at her part-time job, and my mom and dad were both downstairs working in the store.

No, no. In the evening, my mom would come back upstairs. I shouldn't let

myself get any naughty ideas.

I arrived at the station with that thought firmly in mind—just as Miya was coming through the exit wicket.

He wore a bright smile, nothing like the troubled, thoughtful air he'd exuded the last time he came over. I thought I heard him exclaim when he saw me. "I thought I told you to wait at home!" he called as he jogged over.

I couldn't restrain a little laugh, just a puff of air.

"What?" Miya said.

How *could* he be so cute? That's what I was thinking. But I said, "Nothing, just good timing. I finished stuff at home, so I decided to take a little walk and maybe see if you were around."

I kept my thoughts about how adorable he was to myself. He told me he didn't like hearing that, so I tried to control myself and not say it too often. Although it had slipped out on the day of the graduation ceremony, once.

"Sorry," he said. "I should have told you my ETA."

I stopped him before he could apologize any further (like, "I should have at least texted when I got on the train.") and started walking toward my house. "It's cool, man. You did pretty much exactly what you said you would, and anyway, here I am, right? Made your treats all right?"

"Yeah, I did! From setup to cleanup, I've never had baking go so well! Er, well, maybe I had a bit less trouble when I was working with *you*..." He looked proud of himself, but there was a shadow behind it.

"So what's that mean, Miya? What'd you do?"

Whatever it was, it looked like things had turned out well, so it couldn't have been anything too awful.

"Some of the ingredients... I sort of put in more than the recipe said. Just by instinct."

I couldn't help laughing at his grim tone. I know, I know, it was a serious thing for him. "Instinct, huh?"

“I know! Or anyway, I learned. Careful measuring is the lifeblood of baking.”

He was being cute with all his might!

“Kuresawa and the other guys were with you, right?” I said. Miya had said Kuresawa was the one who urged him to go to the event. I figured *he* wouldn’t have any trouble making something that his girlfriend would enjoy. If they were making cookies, he’d probably chosen some adorable shape.

So what about Miya?

“Yeah, Kuresawa and Tashiro were both there. They seemed pretty good at it, so I asked them to help me with stuff that I didn’t understand from the teacher’s demonstration. There was another guy helping out, too—when I was having some trouble, he came over and gave me some advice. That’s how I managed to pull this off!”

He sounded like he’d genuinely enjoyed himself. I wished there had been cooking lessons when I was there. I would have happily gone with him.

“So you had fun?”

“I did!”

I already knew the answer to my question—I just wanted to see him smile.

“Oh, hey,” I said. “I finished reading those two manga you lent me.”

“What did you think?” Miya’s eyes sparkled. It would have been easy enough just to say, “Sure, they were fine.” But I knew Miya was eager to hear what I thought, so I tried to be a little more articulate than that. Talking with him was the first time I’d ever described my response to a book I’d read in detail to anyone, so it was like discovering a new part of myself.

“The one that was a sequel to the last thing you lent me, you know how the main character gets more and more lured in by the guy who’s a great cook? And then the protagonist decides he’s leaned too much on this guy and sort of tries to take a step back? Like, trying to get away with just going to fast food joints and stuff? I felt bad for the other guy. Like, why not go get burgers with him? But he ends up sitting there eating by himself.”

Yikes. I was talking about it like I was describing myself. Guess that’s what I

got for reading something with a theme that hit so close to home. The series was a lighthearted comedy for the most part, so the sudden twist where the guy was sitting at the table by himself was all the more poignant. I felt like it would be only natural to try to take a guy like that home with you, even if you had to prod him a bit.

“Huh! I’m not much of a chef, so I always sympathized a lot more with the uke...”

“But you baked today, right, Miya? So now you know how the other guy feels!”

My eyes wandered to the paper bag he was holding, and he looked a bit shy. “Yeah... I guess so...”

Arrrgh!

If we weren’t at the train station right now...

We chatted as we walked and got back to my house in what felt like no time at all. We went in the back door of the shop and up the stairs. The shop was on the first floor of the building, while the second floor was our living space. The front hall was just at the top of the stairs.

“I had this same thought last time... Going upstairs without poking our heads in at the shop feels like we’re sneaking in,” said Miya. Somehow that made me nervous. I couldn’t say it out loud, not even as a joke.

“It’s just us here today anyway,” I said, but I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth. There was no need to mention that.

I beat myself up about it as I opened the front door. Why would I say that right now? He would think I was, you know, expecting something to happen.

I stole a glance at Miya, hoping I was just overthinking things and that I could let go of the slight sourness in my stomach. Instead, I almost clapped a hand over my mouth in amazement: He was bright red.

I felt my heart skip a beat.

I thought I could hear my own pulse.

There was the *ka-chak* of the door closing.

Each moment was ingraining itself into my brain, like it was happening in slow motion. When I saw my own hand clasp his, it was like I was watching from some other place. My fingers touched his, but they seemed far away. I felt like our hands would meld together from the warmth of his fingers; I was in my own little world—everything simplified and elevated.

“Sasaki?” There was a touch of panic in his voice. His Adam’s apple bobbed dramatically, but he didn’t say anything else.

I hadn’t locked the door. We hadn’t even taken off our shoes. And yet, it felt like things were already starting. I couldn’t help hoping.

I slid my fingers along his hand, tucking them just inside his left sleeve. The skin on the inside of his wrist was thin and smooth, and I could feel his pulse pounding.

I wanted to lose myself in the sensation of it.

“Wait... Just a little longer...” His voice was hardly more substantial than his breath.



Everything I wanted, all of it, was right here at this moment.

“Shuumei, uh...” He was struggling to get the words out, trying to slow me down, but it only made my feelings more intense. Why would he use my name now, of all times?

I was agitated. Excited. I felt like we were doing something...bad.

Was his heart racing as fast as mine?

Instead of asking him in so many words, I leaned down slightly, peering into his face, meeting eyes that shone bashfully. But his expression... He wasn't *against* this, right...? He was definitely nervous, though; I could feel his wrist flinch in my grip.

I leaned in, so close that I couldn't even see his eyes. His lips were right there, just in front of me.

Miya's smell...

“Ah...”

My lips parted, and I was just about to kiss him...when we heard footsteps coming up the stairs from the other side of the door.

“That's too bad,” I whispered, my breath brushing Miya's overheated ears. Then, as much as I hated to do it, I leaned away from him again.

“That's got to be...one of your family members, right?” he whispered back, like we were sharing a secret.

“Yeah, probably. Let's go inside,” I said. We were still taking our shoes off when we heard the key working in the lock. Oh, right—I'd left it unlocked.

Outdoors. At school. I felt like everywhere I'd kissed him had been open, public places. (The one just now didn't count, because it didn't quite happen.)

The lock rattled again and the door opened, and in came my mother. “Did you just get home? Is this your friend?” she asked.

He was more than my friend, but I figured this wasn't the time to bring it up.

“Yeah, just got home,” I said.

“Uh, um, thanks for having me,” Miya said. My mom looked at him, and I think she had an inkling of what was going on.

“Oh, you’re the boy who came to visit when my son was ill,” she said. Doing customer-facing work had given her a talent for remembering faces, and she recalled Miyano’s right away. Of course, it probably helped that I didn’t have a lot of people over to the house.

“Yes, ma’am. My name is Miyano.”

“Well, welcome, Miyano. Sorry, I’ve got to get right back to work. I came up here to grab the shift schedule—I was working on it in the living room and then I just left it there! Shuumei, feel free to drink whatever’s in the fridge. But let me know if we run out of anything.” Even as she spoke she was bustling around, looking for her papers.

“Okay,” was all I said.

She sure took the wind out of my sails. I didn’t know if we’d had a good vibe going or, like, a weird one, but having someone burst in on you at a moment like that was unbelievably tiring. The one silver lining was that she didn’t, you know, catch us in the act.

I glanced at Miya and we grinned at each other.

“Wanna go to my room?” I said.

“Yeah.”

Now the family knew I had a visitor, and who knew who might show up next? I would have to keep my hands to myself.

I had Miya wait in my room while I brought out the dessert I’d made that morning: a special parfait just for him.

When I presented him with it, his eyes went wide. “Wait, *you* made this? Like, by hand? I mean—I’m not accusing you of lying or anything! Thank you very much!”

Wow, he was really into this.

“Well, enjoy!”

Miya kept glancing at the paper bag he'd brought, looking uneasy. I'd been sure he wasn't making me a parfait, so what was the problem?

"Um... The stuff I made isn't remotely on the level of a special parfait... Please don't open it right now. Wait till after I go home, okay? I don't think I could stand to...to compare it to what you've made me..."

We didn't have to compare anything! I was just happy to know Miya had put in that kind of effort for me. "What's up? You sounded thrilled until a minute ago," I said.

"I just...got a dose of reality."

He didn't look unhappy. More embarrassed, I figured.

"I really wanna see what you brought me!" I said with a smile.

"No, don't! Please! Uh, but... I can tell you it tastes all right. So don't worry," he said. Which was it—a fail or not? He was so cute.

"So you tried it, Miya?"

"No, Tashiro did, and the guy who was helping the teacher..."

I figured not, but it was sort of disappointing to hear it out loud.

"Yeah? Gee, would've liked to have them all to myself..." I said. Miya hid his mouth as if he were embarrassed.

"Next time, I'll save them all for you... Probably..."

A little puff of air escaped me. I couldn't help it: I laughed. "What do you mean, probably?" It was just like him to give a serious answer when it would have been easy—and fine—to laugh me off.

"I mean, if we have another cooking lesson, maybe I'll ask you to taste test for me. I was thinking during the ice cream-making thing on the school trip, it seems like when there's only a few of us and I can watch other people work, I don't screw up as much. The problem with home ec lessons is there's no example to follow in our group, so I panic a little and start to just do whatever feels right..."

"Ah, yeah. Easy to do when you're not used to it," I said. I was pretty sure

there were actually a lot of people out there who weren't very good cooks—even more so in high school. I thought it was really proactive of Miya to try to overcome that now. He was such a hard worker.

“I really enjoyed cooking with you, though, Sasaki. I'd like to do it again. Even if I'd prefer to work alone on Valentine's Day or White Day...”

Yeah. When he put it that way, I realized that just the two of us baking together, no particular reason, no particular event, was actually pretty special. It was the sort of thing we probably never would have done if we weren't boyfriends.

“Yeah? I enjoyed baking with you, too, Miya.”

“Well, anyway... Open this later, okay?”

Hesitantly, he held out a pretty little box, and I took it. He'd obviously gotten the box specially to hold his gift to me, and that made me happy, too.

“All right, sure,” I said. “Thanks, Miya.”

I placed the box of cookies by the parfait on my low table. It wasn't exactly the smoothest trade—it reminded me of before we were dating.

“Feels a lot like last year...,” Miya said with a hint of a smile. I smiled back and agreed with a nod.

Namely, it felt like the somewhat forced exchange of Valentine's Day chocolates we'd shared a little more than a year before—the sort of thing that might look like a trope in a BL story, if you were feeling cynical. I knew how stereotypical it seemed, and at the time it was clear Miya didn't feel the same way about me, so I never expected him to give me something in return on White Day. Sure, it had been after class, but coming to a senior classroom in order to give something to someone took courage, in my opinion.

“Last year, it was this passive thing,” he said. “Like, I just thought I wouldn't quite feel right if I didn't give you something. This year, I wanted to be more deliberate about it. Valentine's Day didn't seem like enough. So I decided to take advantage of White Day...”

However much he regretted last year, it couldn't be as much as I did.

“Yeah, I just gave you some random snacks I had lying around. I wanted to make up for that, and here we are,” I said.

“Okay, but...this is really too much. Mind if I take a picture? I’d like my mom to see this.”

“Sure, go ahead. You might be interested to know that this parfait doesn’t include any of the ingredients you told me were off limits, Miya.”

Miya was leaaaaaning to get his phone in the right spot, looking for that perfect shot. Maybe he was trying to avoid any shadows. He looked from above, then from the side, then diagonally. I waved, thinking maybe I was in the shot, too.

“Sasaki, you’re blurry. You— Wait. This doesn’t use any sugar, eggs, flour, or butter? How is that even possible?!”

I’d thought he might be surprised, but he surpassed my expectations.

“I used some products that include those, but I didn’t add any myself. I figured that counted.”

“Counted! I just, uh, I only wanted to keep you from making cookies. You know, something to tie your hands...”

Tie my hands, huh?

“Ha-ha. I thought that might be the case. But I figured if I could make the whole thing without gelatin, I might as well skip the other stuff, too. It took me a few tries. Like I said, there’s sugar in the liqueur and some of the other base ingredients, but, you know. Give it a try.”

Miya picked up his spoon but gave the parfait a funny look. “Liqueur...?”

It was so cute the way he parroted me. I felt a rush of the warm fuzzies. “It’s a kind of alcohol. Sweet stuff,” I said.

Miya took a bite, then blinked. “Wait... So you mean, this sponge-cakey part —?”

“That’s a brownie. I used ten-grain rice, coffee liqueur, coconut oil...and instead of wheat flour, I used rice flour and almond powder.”

At the bottom of the glass, I'd placed cream and brownie so that they made a sort of tiramisu. Then, I'd tucked in some sauce with a yogurt base, over which I'd layered berry jelly to give it some body. I'd topped it all off with a "cocoa stick" made of a spring roll wrapper and unsweetened cocoa powder.

"I don't think it's that sweet, but maybe you will," I said.

The different layers interacted nicely with each other, and other than the cocoa stick, they were all varying degrees of sweet. I was afraid that if I backed off too much on the sweetness, the flavor would end up muddled and not very dessert-like.

"Not at all! It's delicious. I don't really taste any alcohol, though..."

He really seemed to like it, munching away as we talked. He especially seemed happy with the brownie, which was thick and soft.

"You want a nice, spiked dessert?" I said, thinking that maybe I should have tried to get some of the flavor of the liqueur to stick. I hadn't known him for that long, after all, and he *had* said he liked the flavor of alcohol. Maybe a tiramisu with a good dash of rum?

"Oh! That's not what I—er, but I admit, it sounds interesting..."

"Ha-ha! That's what I'll do next time, then. And you can let me know how it tastes, Miya." Neither my family nor I liked alcohol very much, so anything I made like that would be exclusively for him.

"Okay. Yeah... I think I'd like that."

His eyes were shining, and down by the corner of his mouth there was just a bit of chocolate. I knew he couldn't see it. I should wipe it away...

I reached out but then stopped.

"What is it?" Miya asked, giving me a perplexed look. Perplexed and *adorable*. How I wanted to touch his face. If we were boyfriends...maybe that was all right?

I leaned forward, my face getting closer to his. His shoulders trembled. Hesitantly, but almost reflexively, he closed his eyes. I aimed for the corner of his tightly closed mouth—and licked the chocolate away.

“Yikes!”

Yeah, that would be surprising. But also very cute. I chuckled in spite of myself. “Kinda BL-esque, right?” I said. He’d probably closed his eyes expecting a kiss, but I was just cleaning the chocolate off his face. I’d seen all sorts of moments like this one in the books I’d borrowed from him.

“I admit I’m a little surprised. I didn’t think you would do something like that, Sasaki... I didn’t mean to shout.”

“Ha-ha... Did you like it?” I asked, a bit teasingly.

He couldn’t quite bring himself to meet my eyes. “I didn’t *not* like it, but that could mean... Like, if I didn’t want that, it would make you sound like some kind of pervert, but otherwise... I sound like some sort of BL character...”

“And what do you want it to mean?” I suspected that he didn’t want me to press the subject, but I did anyway.

“Sasaki... Are you making fun of me?” He finally looked at me, simultaneously critical and annoyed. I knew he wouldn’t give me that look unless he was comfortable, and a smile made its way onto my face in spite of myself.

This time Miya looked properly pouty—I guess he didn’t like me grinning at him. I’ll bet he never expected me to pull a stunt like something out of a BL book, a teasing quasi-kiss like that. But here I’d licked him—he was obviously thrown by it, and maybe he didn’t know how to answer me. Maybe he was on the alert, knowing he might send us down *that* particular path depending on how he responded. It probably didn’t help that he realized he’d had a part in making me this way with his BL.

“Sorry. Yes, I was teasing you,” I said, feeling like I shouldn’t push him any further. Even so, I couldn’t keep a small smile off my face. I tried to hide my mouth.

“Sure... It’s fine,” Miya said, then went back to finishing off his parfait.

“Oh yeah. I wanted to give these back to you before I forgot,” I said, handing him a couple of manga I’d finished reading. I had stashed them on the sideboard by my bed.

“Sure, thanks.” Miya took them, but he seemed to have something else on his mind. I looked where he was looking—he was checking out the shelf under the sideboard. Maybe the album, which was sticking out a little, had caught his eye.

“What, this thing?” I said. “This is my graduation album. Wanna take a look?”

“Can I?!”

Ah, the enthusiasm with which he bit! Very cute.

“Yeah, sure.” I was smiling already. Smiling seemed to be all I did when Miya was around. I never wanted to miss a single thing he did—it was all so adorable and really brought home how much I loved him.

Miya put the manga on my desk and took out the album, opening it gingerly. At first he’d given me a look like he wanted me to join him, but soon he was completely absorbed in looking at the photos of my class; he didn’t look up again until he reached the end of the book. He was like a kid sucked into a photo-hunt puzzle.

“There aren’t a lot of pictures of you in here, Sasaki,” he said. Ah, so he *was* hunting—for me. Was that why he hadn’t looked up? Because he wanted to find the “answer” on his own? Maybe that was just my affection for him talking.

“Ha-ha! Yeah, I tended to duck photos. But somehow I ended up in charge of the album our third year.”

“Huh... I’m a little surprised. But now that you mention it, I do recall you carrying a camera at the culture festival.”

So he remembered that!

“Yeah. They figured I must have time to kill since I wasn’t in any clubs or on any committees. Didn’t give me any choice about being on the album team. Forced labor!”

“Forced labor?” Miya laughed and looked back at the photo album. “Oh!” He sure took me by surprise. It sounded like he’d found something. But what?

“What’s up?” I said. Miya was looking at a page of photos from when I was a second-year.

“I found a super-rare Hirano!” he said. “With b-b-black hair!” He pointed at

the picture, looking at me.

“Oh yeah. That’s from the closing ceremony of our second year. Boy, that takes me back. He was back to blond by the time the new semester started, though.”

“In just the blink of an eye, huh?”

Wait, but—hadn’t Miya been with Hirano before I got there that day? “I seem to remember you taking a bunch of photos, Miya.” And acting all chummy.

“Hirano deleted them all later.” He sounded pretty bummed about it.

“Ahh...” Now I was sorry for laughing. Was Hirano really that against being seen with black hair? Wasn’t that a tiny bit childish?

“Hey, maybe he’ll go with black hair for college,” I suggested.

“Yeah, maybe...! Wait! I’ll text Hirano later and see if maybe he can come back to visit as one of the Disciplinary Committee’s old members!”

Old members of the Disciplinary Committee coming back? There was a novel idea. Then again, for as prominent a leader of the committee as he’d been, Hirano was surprisingly dedicated to doing whatever he felt like, so maybe he could pull it off.

“You could text him right now. I don’t mind,” I said. It wasn’t like it would take much time.

It was just an off-the-cuff remark as far as I was concerned, but Miya suddenly looked serious. “Huh? No, I— I’m with you right now... Later is fine,” he said, sounding more and more embarrassed as he talked.

What should I say? I wondered. This was a total ambush. Did he really prioritize me like that? I mean, show me a guy who *wouldn’t* be caught off guard to hear something like that.

I clenched my fists hard, to stop myself from reaching out for him. I mean, like a lover. Much as I hated it, I couldn’t do that, not when my family might come home at any time.

I also didn’t want to be the reason Miya felt down. “Oh, uh, right now is fine, really,” I said. “Yeah, it’s fine. I’d probably even feel better if I was here when

you were making a date like that.”

“Feel better...?” He looked confused. I guess it hadn’t crossed his mind that I might get jealous.

“Er, never mind. The point is you can text him right now. Better to do that sort of thing right when you think of it, so you don’t forget.”

I didn’t want Miya fretting about it, so although it was a little painful, I hid any jealousy and encouraged him instead. I wouldn’t be able to pull anything, you know, out of line while he was texting Hirano, so that would be a plus for me. It didn’t matter if someone might suddenly appear—with too much time on my hands, eventually I might not be able to restrain myself.

I decided to grab some drinks from the fridge. Sugarless iced tea for him, an apple juice that happened to be there for me.

Hirano, who despite his looks was a pretty diligent guy, texted back right away, so sure enough Miya was typing out another message to him.

“Oh, thank you,” he said as I handed him the drink.

“No problem.” I wasn’t sure what to do with myself, so I decided to crack open one of the BL comics that was still sitting on the desk, even though I had technically just given them back to him. I’d meant to give him the rundown on my reactions, but I’d ended up only talking about the one book; we hadn’t talked about this one.

“I’d feel better if I was here.” Real nice. I was frustrated by my own peevishness. I knew I didn’t have to worry about Miya and Hirano. I’d just apologized to Hirano for using him to get a conversation going—and now I was using him to keep myself under control.

I guess at this point it’s not such a big deal to talk about Hirano. He’d said it was fine, after all. If I let my thoughts run away with me like this, they would never stop. Wouldn’t it be weird to actively avoid talking about a mutual acquaintance? Not to mention a pain in the neck.

“Thanks for being patient, Sasaki.”

“You guys set a date?” I asked.

Miya smiled but not very happily. “He said he’s not sure. He doesn’t know what his college schedule looks like yet, and he’d have to get permission to be on our campus, so he has to talk to the teachers.”

I hadn’t seen Hirano since graduation, but it sounded like he was as unexpectedly rules-abiding as he had always been.

“He’s a real Type A, that one,” I said.

“Yeah, Hirano doesn’t seem like the kind to give a half-hearted answer, huh?” Miya agreed. He mumbled something about how *forthright* was the word for that sort of thing, sounding almost impressed.

“Uh-huh. But neither are you, right, Miya?”

“Hmm... I guess, maybe. But me and Hirano, we’re totally different people.”

“True enough,” I said. I wondered if this counted as using him as a subject of conversation but decided it didn’t matter.

“Oh yeah. What did you think of that book, Sasaki?”

The book, which I had been flipping through trying to jog my memory, was mostly about the sort of stuff that happened in everyday life. I liked the touching acts of kindness and the comedy, which took the form of delightful dialogue between the characters.

“The jokes were definitely funny. I liked that,” I said.

“Yeah, you have to chuckle, right? It’s super laid-back and a lot of fun, so I think it would be perfect for people who don’t read a lot of BL. If only I could get them to read it...”

It was a BL title, so yes, there were some of *those* scenes, but all of it took place within the scope of normal life.

“I appreciate how it’s really, you know, down-to-earth,” I said. “The way it *feels* like real life is great. I don’t want to burst out laughing—just a chuckle is fine.”

“I know, right?! And the way the jokes are built on our sense of the ordinary, the way you can laugh because the main characters have all these familiar qualities. And the tempo is great—there aren’t any flowery turns of phrase or

cutting one-liners, but it's still riveting... It can be thought-provoking sometimes, but it's never in-your-face about it. It stays with you in the best way."

I hadn't heard Miya talk so much for a long time. It was adorable.

"Uh-huh," I said. Speaking of chuckle-inducing charm...

"I'm sure there's gonna be a drama CD of this one, and I can't wait! I'm so curious what the dialogue will sound like with real voice actors doing it. At first, I thought all the stories in this book were separate, but then right at the end of the third one, there's that moment where you realize there's a through line to the entire book, and I loved it. The stories are all interesting on their own, but suddenly you see what was happening in the background, and the world feels so big! Man, it's great..."

He finally paused, then drained his entire iced tea in one swig. I guess his throat was dry.

"Want some more? I'll bet that parfait left you parched," I said.

"Not at all! It was all that talking I just did... You sit here, Sasaki."

I'd been trying to sit as far from him as I could manage, but it didn't look like he'd noticed. I was already halfway to my feet by the time he stopped me, but I sat back down.

"By the way, are you and Hirano and the others going on a graduation trip or anything?"

A graduation trip?

"Hadn't even thought about it," I said. It didn't seem like anyone in our class had.

Interesting. Did we all look that close in the eyes of the underclassmen? I mean, I wouldn't say we *weren't* close, but I wasn't friends with Hirano the way I think Miya was imagining, so the idea hadn't occurred to us. I wasn't even sure which "others" Miya had in mind.

"Oh... Tashiro made it sound like he was going on a graduation trip with the upperclassmen. I just thought maybe, in high school and all, maybe graduation trips got really wild and...I mean, that maybe everyone went on one."

I had to assume that Miya didn't realize that hearing about this, my first thought would be that I would be perfectly happy to go on a trip with *him*. I couldn't swing it this year, in terms of my schedule, and anyway, it was too early for us to be taking an overnight trip together.

Maybe next year, then. When Miya graduated.

"Hmm. Nope, nothing like that on my calendar," I said.

"Oh, is that because you have to help with the store?" Miya smiled, observing that we seemed to be busy with a lot of customers.

That sort of thing made me even happier than if he had complimented me personally.

"Yeah, kind of, but I just don't really like having to go along with a group."

I could see myself now: I would sneak away and do my own thing. My friends, who knew I was like that, didn't invite me to go on trips.

"Really? I feel like you've always been keeping pace with me, investing in my interests..." Miya looked puzzled again, and again I felt oddly embarrassed.

"Well... You're the only exception, Miya."

He looked downright solemn at that. "Thank you very much," he said. What was going on here? He seemed like he was really thinking hard about what I'd said.

"Ha-ha. I guess that's how it goes with the one you love. Or maybe you fall in love because you feel that way? Even I'm not sure which comes first."

I did know that there was only one person who had introduced me to these feelings. The more time I spent with Miya, the more I felt like I was discovering myself. I wouldn't say I, you know, learned kindness and loyalty at his feet or something, but I felt like the kindness and loyalty he shared with me took root in me.

I suddenly realized I wasn't quite looking at him; I was too embarrassed. I made myself look back at him and discovered that he was staring at the floor, his hands on his chest. Wait... What?

"Wait... Hold on a second. Please. I'm over my limit for today," Miya said.

“What limit?” I asked.

He flushed faintly. “W-well, like...”

“Yeah?” I said, urging him on, and Miya slowly looked at me.

“I guess, like, the number of times I thought how cute you are, Sasaki. Or, like, maybe my feelings have overheated? Something like that...”

He was having trouble putting it into words. His eyes settled on me, then flitted away again in embarrassment. It was like he was stealing little glances at me, even though we were right next to each other.

“I’m so full of these feelings. It’s too much...”

Who could hear that from their boyfriend and not want to grab him in their arms?

“It’s not going to get any better,” I said.

I think Miya could feel me going for the hug, because he raised his eyes to me. “Um... When I heard what you said about Tashiro, I couldn’t help feeling sorry. I wished I’d offered to go on a graduation trip with you. I mean, I know maybe we couldn’t actually do it... So I was sort of relieved when you said you weren’t going to go anywhere...”

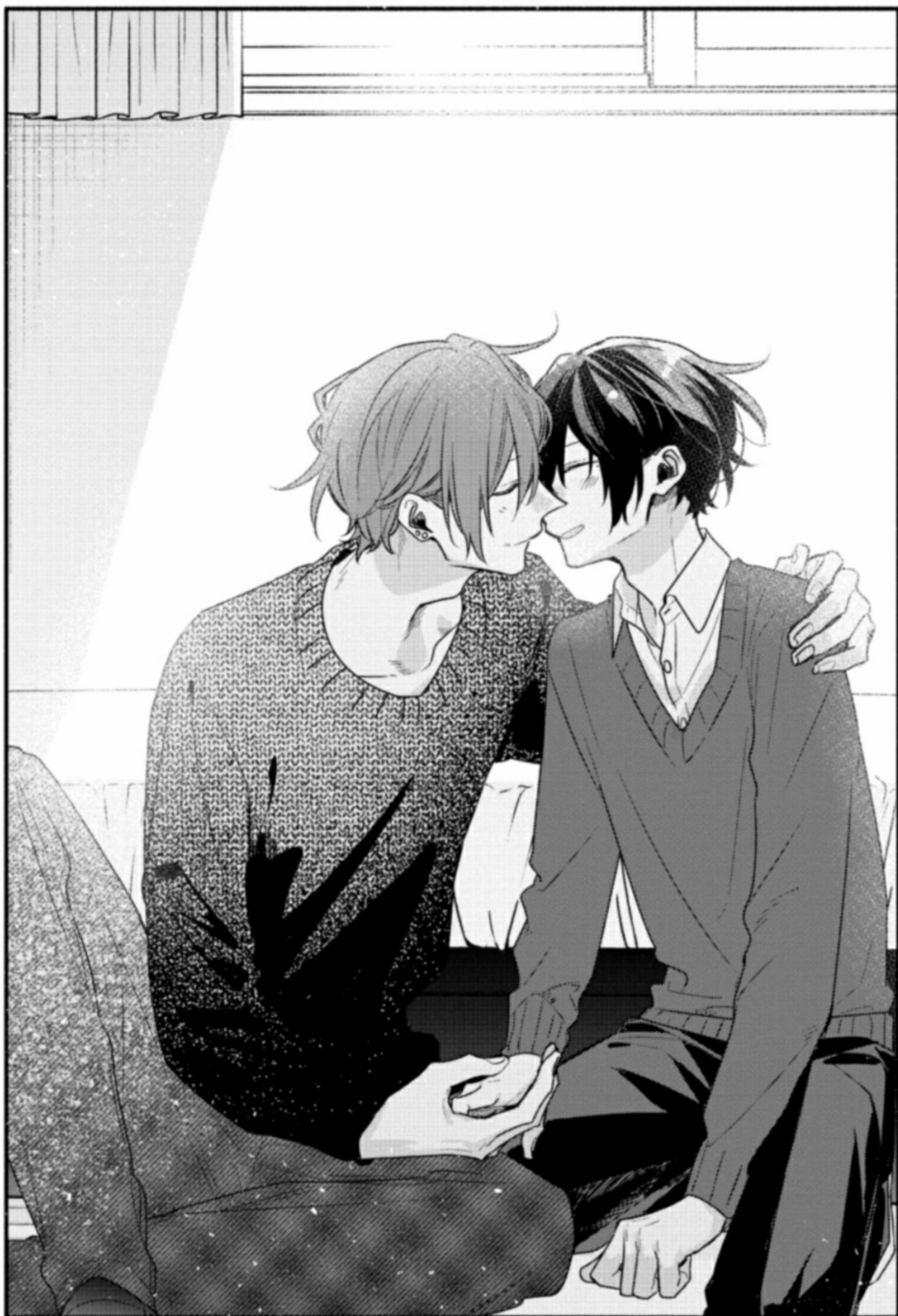
I heard his voice, right by my ear: *Sorry*. I hugged him gently. He felt so small against me.

“‘Cause you want me all to yourself?” I asked, and I could hear the honey in my own voice. Suddenly I felt like I was someone else.

“Yeah.” This time, Miya didn’t apologize.

“Can I kiss you? Just once or twice.”

“Hah! I’ve heard *that* line before.” Miya snickered, and then he closed his eyes.





It was a weird feeling.

Only one thing made my current self different from who I was a day before: Miya.

I thought I'd be on cloud nine when he finally said yes to dating me, but I felt a lot more ordinary than I'd imagined. I was definitely still the same me I'd been before.

Well, maybe I was walking on air a *little* bit.

For example, usually after I got up early to help out at the bakery, I felt sleepy again, but today I was wide awake; there was no risk of me collapsing back into my bed.

Though I didn't have to, I decided to head to school. I rode in the same train car I always did, but I didn't bump into Miya. I wondered why not... And then I remembered we'd traded contact info.

I sent him a message: You on the train? But it turned out he'd just gotten off.

I could hear his voice in my mind as I read his text: You coming to school today? I felt myself smile.

Yeah, I told him. I'll shoot you a text as soon as I get there.

During that part of the year, third-years had optional attendance days, so teachers didn't call roll in the classrooms, and you had to go to the faculty room to get permission to use one of the open study rooms. It felt a little funny—like you're half graduated already even though it's only January. But being at school helped keep me in line; it was more efficient than trying to do stuff at home.

"Excuse me," I said as I walked up to my homeroom teacher, who sat at his desk amid the buzz of morning preparations. He looked downright surprised to see me.

"Oh, Sasaki, in again today? You're very diligent."

Why'd he have to say that? It made me a little embarrassed. All he had to do was give me the key.

When I thought back on how lackadaisical I'd been in my first year, being told

I was “diligent” now made me feel like a kid. I’d bet guys like Hirano—people who had been good students all along—didn’t have to deal with this sort of thing.

“Please don’t give me that look, sir,” I said.

“Hah, sorry. That’s true, you’re a proper college candidate now.”

“Here’s the written request to use the free study room. Key, please.”

“Thanks, I’ll take that.” The teacher picked up the personal stamp resting by his coffee cup and stamped my paperwork. Then he said, “Someone was here just before you, though. I gave the key to him.”

I wondered who it could be. If Teach knew him, then was it someone from my class?

“Thanks, sir,” I said, then excused myself.

As I worked my way toward the door, I saw faculty seated at their desks, standing while they talked on the phone, and having discussions. There was a guy drinking water; that was the teacher I’d had for Classical Japanese my first year. He always got a bad case of dry throat in winter. Huh, so he was still here. It was funny: Once I no longer had that lone point of connection with him—his class—it was like he didn’t exist for me anymore. There were a lot of teachers like that at this school.

For that matter, I knew there had to be middle schoolers studying at this very moment to get into this school. Funny how time kept flowing.

With the bustle of the faculty room around me, I thought about how annoying it was that someone else had gotten to the free study room before me, and that I’d have to wait if it wasn’t already open. Who could it even be? I hated waiting. Well, okay, I knew I shouldn’t be annoyed about something that hadn’t happened yet.

I bowed politely as I left the faculty room. No sooner had I emerged than I found Hirano in the hallway in front of me.

“So you just need me to put this on the sofa in the social studies room?” he was asking. I guess someone had asked him to carry something.

“That’s right. Thanks, that’s a big help.”

“Thanks, Hirano!”

The two teachers thanking him were the math and social studies instructors.

Good for him, I thought, and I was about to go on my way when someone said, “Hey, Sasaki.” It was Hirano, of course. “Perfect timing. Help me carry this.”

“Bah.”

“Don’t ‘bah’ me!”

Ah well. It was better than getting to the free study room before the guy with the key and having to wait around. Some people went to the college prep room to grab the entrance exam workbook before they came to study, and if that’s what my mysterious keeper of the key was doing, I would need to kill time anyway. This was as good a way as any.

“Yeah, okay, sure,” I said.

“All right, this way. We’re going to the social studies room.”

Hirano handed me a cardboard box. It wasn’t very big, but it sure was heavy.

“Yow! What’s in here, a globe? Didn’t know they weighed so much...” I had to hold the box with both hands, and it was dusty to boot. “Yuck...”

“Yeah, and there’s papers stuffed everywhere there isn’t globe.”

I knew I should have turned him down. Yeah, it’d annoy me to have to stand around when I didn’t even know who I was waiting for. I’d figured carting stuff around would be at least a little better, but if I’d known the load was going to be so heavy, I would have picked waiting.

“Come on, pick up the pace,” Hirano said. I suddenly realized he was well ahead of me.

Yeah, sure. I trotted toward him. Was this what he called helping him? Looked to me like I was doing all the work.

What’s going on here?

I wasn’t exactly super focused on Hirano, but every time I looked at him, he

appeared to have more stuff in his arms. Did he collect requests for help just by being in the vicinity of the faculty room?

“Do they always foist this much work on you?” I asked. Sure, he was on the Disciplinary Committee, but this seemed like more than just teachers leaning on a helpful student. It never happened to Miya, that was for sure.

“Nobody’s foisting anything on me. I happen to be going this way.”

Geez. I knew Hanzawa could be a little funny, but I guess Hirano was no slouch in the weirdo department, either.

“I sorta figured you’d be in the dorm studying for tests,” I said. The dorm had its own free study room; it seemed like a lot of trouble to put on your uniform and come all the way to school just to do test prep.

“I usually am,” he said. “But I can’t concentrate if I stay cooped up in the dorm forever.”

Well, color me surprised. “You have that problem, too, Hirano?” I said. I’d assumed he was pretty much good to go anywhere there was a desk.

“What do you take me for? As long as classes were in session, I was able to strike a good balance between school and the dorm. Anyway, it feels really weird to watch all the first-and second-years go off and just stay there by myself. And I can’t focus for very long, suddenly spending all my time in the dormitory. Besides, the library has collections of past test questions, so I go there sometimes.”

There were a lot of those collections around, I guess.

“Huh,” I said. He must have been here to study, too. Did this mean I might see him pretty much every day of the free attendance period, except when there were tests?

First, we stopped by the nearest math classroom to drop off some of Hirano’s baggage, but on the way there we ran into the Disciplinary Committee’s faculty advisor and he gave Hirano something else to carry. He was starting to look like a delivery guy loaded down with packages.

Then we headed for the social studies room. My arms were getting tired. Why

would he take on all these little chores when he'd come here to study?

At long last we were within sight of the social studies room. After some hesitation, I told him—about how I'd decided to go out with Miya.

It had just happened the previous day, so using the present participle, *going out with*, felt a little funny. I settled on something in the past tense.

That seemed to surprise Hirano, but then I heard him make a muffled sound of understanding. I glanced over and saw that his ears were red. "Dammit, I'm no good with that sort of thing," he said, acting angry, but I could tell he was mostly embarrassed. I told him I knew that, but privately I was relieved to see him react in such a Hirano-ish way.

In spite of all that, he was the one who'd gotten in touch with me that day and made it so I could meet Miya. I never dreamed I might get *that* kind of help from him.

Just as I was thinking back, we heard Miya call Hirano's name. I poked my head out of the classroom, and when he saw that I was there, too, his expression quickly shifted to one of awkwardness. I was actually thrilled—it showed that he really did think of us as dating now.

"Gimme that," Hirano said, grabbing the box out of my arms. I think he was trying to be thoughtful—or maybe hide his own embarrassment?

"I get to school just in time to bump into you by the faculty room—and get pressured into helping you do chores for the teachers," I griped, but he only replied that I was lucky to get some exercise—ruthless as ever.

One relationship that had changed, another that hadn't: a perfect balance. A fulfilled high school life, I thought, almost as if I was observing someone else. And to run into Miya right after I had told Hirano about us—I was able to make a date for today. With my boyfriend, Miya.

There was no anxiety between us; I just talked to him and he talked to me. This was what dating meant, I realized. It was more than just kissing and stuff—it was a relationship where you could relax and be yourself.

Today, it turned out, felt completely different from the day before.

Hirano and I jogged down the stairs and arrived at the self-study room. He calmly took out the key.

“I shoulda known. The teacher said someone else beat me to it. So it was you,” I said.

“I guess.” He unlocked the room and we went inside; I could feel the air shifting as we entered. It was silent and cool with no one else there.

Hirano sat down, and I sat beside him. I didn’t think that hard about it—it was just, like, why not? If someone else came in, they’d probably sit between us anyway. I just got the spot first.

Feels kinda...weird somehow, being in the self-study room with Hirano. Especially when it’s just the two of us.

Hirano was one of the smartest guys in his class—and he had class with Hanzawa!

It wasn’t like I never spent time with Hirano. When I had a few minutes to kill after school, I’d shoot the breeze with him if he happened to be there. And once when I asked him casually what he was up to, he’d said he was going to go check out the basketball team’s practice, so I decided to tag along. And at lunch—it wasn’t like we always sat with the same people or anything, so if we happened to be near each other, we would chat.

But in spite of all that, our talk never got really personal. I was aware that Hirano was unusually close with his roommate—come to think of it, how were they getting along?

There was an intake of breath; Hirano was about to say something but then thought better of it.

He sat at his desk, studiously solving math problems. He didn’t even seem to notice me watching him—man, he could really focus. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. This was the self-study room, after all.

For that matter, what was I doing? Most guys didn’t even come to school during free attendance, and here I was, first thing in the morning—but at this rate, I was going to waste the entire day sitting around.

The tests are timed. Maybe I should try to see how many problems I can solve in a certain amount of time.

There wasn't much need for self-direction on the mock exams, but at this point, a guy started to want a good benchmark for how well he could really do.

Eh, maybe I'll do it tomorrow. Bring a wristwatch like I would to the real thing.

I remembered I had a set of earbuds in my bag. Maybe I could use the timer on my phone to time myself instead of a watch. But I would connect the earphones so it wasn't obnoxious when the alarm went off.

I was about to pull over my bag, which I'd set on the desk beside mine, but then I realized maybe it wasn't polite to be rifling through my bag right when we'd started studying, so I sat back down. Partly I was afraid to look for them, but partly it was Hirano; I felt bad filling the room with little distractions when he was so focused.

I had to get myself into a better headspace, or I was only going to fall further behind. I looked up and saw the clock on the classroom wall. It said 8:40.

Guess I don't need my phone.

I put my phone, which I had grabbed in the meantime, back down and turned to the collection of problems in front of me.

I worked on them for a while, but eventually I found I couldn't concentrate. I put my head in my hands and heaved a big sigh.

Being so aware of the time made everything more stressful, which made this more tiring than normal studying. Usually, when I was working on one of my weaker subjects, I would go back to the reference books each time I made even a little progress, and that served as a nice change of pace.

I wasn't very good at focusing constantly on one specific thing. Knowing the real tests were just around the corner only made it worse. This was a different kind of pressure from what I'd felt when I was studying for high school entrance exams—did that show that I'd grown to care just a little more about my future? Besides, I had just started dating someone. What if I failed my tests and became this awful burden on Miya? I couldn't let that happen.

I felt the air shift again and looked over just as Hirano set down his pen. (I didn't think he'd done it because he noticed me turning to him. Just coincidence.) He yawned and stretched his arms over his head. Yeah. He was just taking a short break.

"I'm gonna grab a drink. You want something from the vending machine, Hirano?" I asked. Food and drinks weren't allowed in the classroom, so we would have to have our drinks outside.

"It's cool. I'll come with you. I'd like to get some fresh air anyway."

"Sounds good. Gonna lock the room?"

"Yeah, guess I better. It's in our names right now."

After school, the self-study room was left open for everyone, but at this hour only people with permission were allowed to use it. Anyway, if no one else had shown up by this point, they probably wouldn't. No one would come to school this late.

I let Hirano hang on to the key. We left our stuff in the room—we'd be right back. I just grabbed my phone and wallet, and we ambled out into the chilly hallway.

The closest vending machine was by the school's front door. I bought a can of hot cocoa and worked my way up the stairs, my body shivering in the cold.

"Bit chilly out, huh," Hirano muttered. I totally agreed with him.

"Shoulda grabbed my jacket," I said. I'd left it in the room.

"What's wrong with you, dumbass?" Hirano said with a bit of a smile.

"Aren't *you* cold?" I said.

"Well, one of us has more *muscle* than the other."

"Yow, that hurts!"

True, when I caught glimpses of Hirano changing for gym class, he was definitely ripped. Even though he wasn't on any sports teams and looked slim in his uniform.

"Sorry," he said.

Me, I'd never made any special effort to improve my physique. I wasn't flabby, but I didn't have Hirano's tone and definition.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I lift," I said, passing it off with a joke. Still, if I got sick from this and messed up my stomach, I really would look like an idiot, so maybe I'd bring a hand warmer tomorrow. I was a bit paranoid about having a healthy gut, given the business my family was in.

Before I knew it, we were back at the classroom. We couldn't take our drinks inside, so we just sort of stood in the hallway. The hand in which I was holding my cocoa was warm enough to tingle a little. I glanced out the window, but I didn't see anyone around.

It was a weird moment: just me and Hirano standing there in the hallway, during school hours, but not in an ordinary classroom or even the self-study room. The school building was eerily quiet; the smallest sounds seemed to echo. We talked in whispered tones—which wasn't that different from usual, since neither of us was really the boisterous type to begin with. Hirano, as long as you didn't make him angry, was a pretty laid-back guy.

There was no one else in the hallway. We could hear a teacher's voice drifting from one of the classrooms. We wouldn't have to go back through one of those doors for a while. Only when we were getting ready for the graduation ceremony.

I thought about what a long way off that seemed. I was officially one of those students whose whole business now was taking tests.

I gave my perspiring can of cocoa a gentle swish, then let out a sigh. In the past, I never could have imagined myself like this—just outside the self-study room with one of the smartest guys in class, silently preparing for my tests. Standing outside the self-study room, where I belonged, instead of wandering the halls, even though I was technically on break.

It's not like me. It feels...icky.

Maybe I was overachieving a bit *too* much today. I shook my head, not sure what I was even thinking. Maybe too much studying had knocked a screw loose.

Miya has class until noon, right? That gave me more than two hours until he

was done, but it also meant I was only halfway through the morning. I could do this, right?

“How long you plan to study, Hirano?” I asked. I pulled the tab on my can of cocoa, opening it up, just like Hirano had on his canned coffee. His drink of choice made him look more like a rebel.

“Till noon,” he said.

Ahh, that’s warm. I could feel the heat spreading around my body.

“Hmm,” I said.

That was perfect—I would have someone right next to me to keep me from slacking off, until exactly the moment when I planned to quit. My lucky day.

Our conversation naturally died away. Two guys who didn’t talk much to begin with weren’t going to become chatterboxes if there was nothing to talk about. The silence didn’t bother either of us.

I was consumed with guilt and regret for having tried to put a hand on Miya at school the day before. I could only apologize, but it was just me pushing my feelings on him in a desperate attempt not to leave us distant. And despite all that, Miya had given me his answer.

He hadn’t simply said he’d go out with me. He looked me right in the eyes and said he loved me, too, and he’d followed that with more emotional words. Throughout the whole thing, he was obviously trying not to make me anxious, and looking back on it now, I could only be amazed at how thoughtful he was. I couldn’t believe I had met someone like him.

We’d come closer. Then we’d kissed. There was laughter; there were tears. In fact, there was a lot going on.

It amused me to realize that it was Miya who had gotten us properly dating. Maybe it was the influence of BL on his thinking, but anyway, I adored it. I wondered what class he was in right now.

I wondered what Hirano was thinking about, too, even though I had no clue what it could be.

Sometimes, in moments like this, I suddenly see myself sort of...trying to look

good.

I wanted to show my boyfriend my best side. That's why I was trying to work hard at my studies, at least a little. Well, okay, that wasn't the only reason. My personal interest leaned toward the humanities, but grades-wise, it was the sciences where I excelled. Frankly, it was a struggle. My one saving grace was that mathematics was one of the elective test subjects—numbers, I could handle.

One of my teachers had joked that I should try to pass my exams on the strength of my math alone, but unfortunately, I could never swing enough points that way. I felt like I was studying harder than I ever had in my life.

I should have just gone into something math-or science-related, I told myself. But if I picked a program just because I knew I *could* get in, that would make college no different from high school. I would hate it, and then I would lose sight of why I was even going.

When I saw Miya talk so much about the things he enjoyed and was passionate about, I realized that I needed to try to pursue a school that seemed at least a little, the slightest bit, more interesting to me than the rest—or I would probably never find any meaning going there.

He said he was rooting for me...

The thought made me want to justify his support by working hard and putting my best foot forward. I was a little worried that it was too obvious I was trying to look good, which would make me look dumb instead, but I figured it had to be worthwhile to make at least a bit of effort, rather than just lounging around in my room while Miya was at class.

Some guys managed to look totally relaxed even when they were working their butts off, but tests always brought some nerves with them.

I don't think I could have thought this way before I met Miya. I'd always been a bit skeptical about the whole power-of-love thing, about that desire to cherish someone. Maybe there were people around me who felt that stuff, but I wasn't one of them. Because I didn't believe in it, I never saw it, and because I never saw it, I never understood the driving force behind that kind of passion. It all just looked like a lot of trouble to me.

Hirano abruptly looked up. “You see Miyano after all that yesterday?”

This was a surprise. I hadn’t expected Hirano, of all people, to bring that up.

“Oh, yeah. Bumped into him at the train station.”

Speaking of which, there was something I’d forgotten. I chuckled, my voice shaking a little on the last few words. I’d met Miya, all right—with Hirano’s help.

“Aw, shove it,” he said, obviously to cover his embarrassment. It was almost funny how awkward he seemed to feel about this.

I remembered, then, that he and I didn’t really share any interests. When we talked, it was usually about classes and our teachers and stuff; we didn’t say much about our private lives. Well, except Miya. He was different.

“So, Hirano. What do you think about Miyano?” I asked. It felt like a long time since I’d used his full name.

“Hrm?” Hirano didn’t seem to understand the question. Wait—maybe he was getting the wrong idea. I didn’t *suspect* Miyano of anything!

“You know. Remember at the beginning, how you said to keep my hands off your people?”

I’d met Miya in July two years earlier, and we’d started getting closer throughout the fall. Back then, one out of every few times I went to see Miya, I’d end up getting an earful from Hirano. I didn’t mind much, but among other things, he told me not to try to put the moves on Miya—he didn’t seem to like me getting too close to his precious junior student.

“That was because the teachers were hounding me about who you were and what you were up to when you suddenly started spending all your time in another year’s classroom. You hardly used to get up from your seat, and suddenly you’re leaving our room all the time? And not just to goof off, but to visit an underclassman? Anyone would wonder what was going on.”

Gee, that sort of made me sound like an upperclassman who was taking advantage of his seniority to make problems for a younger student.

“Ha-ha-ha,” I said. “Was I that weird about it?” I hadn’t realized even the teachers had an eye on me!

“You were pretty weird.” Hirano sighed.

I started to wonder if I’d looked, you know, dangerous. Miya seemed so mature, and me, well, people said I could look like a bit of a hooligan. Maybe I couldn’t blame them for worrying when they saw me throwing myself at him.

Okay...so it was kind of making sense. But at the time, I just hadn’t been paying attention to anyone else at all. I was caught up in feelings I’d never had before and enjoying it. Maybe I’d acted a bit crazed.

I was a little embarrassed to think back on it now, but then again, it had enabled me to become friends with Miya, so maybe it was all good. It sure had been fun anyway.

“As underclassmen go, Miyano... I guess he can take some minding,” Hirano said, quietly but suddenly. He seemed to be answering the question I’d asked.

It made me think of something else I’d heard... “Huh. Speaking of which, Hirano, how are things going with Mister Roommate?”

“Huh? The hell is that supposed to mean?” Hirano’s brow wrinkled.

“Miya was asking...”

“Like I’d tell you,” he grumbled.

If there was nothing going on, he wouldn’t be acting this way. At least, I thought so—but Hirano could be a hard guy to read.

“Anyway, I’m sure you’ll meet him. He’s got another year after we graduate, just like Miyano.”

Ah, so there were possibilities here.

“Sure, maybe,” I said.

But, I thought, that meant there was every chance I would never find out. I didn’t think Hirano seemed like the kind to spill the beans to some acquaintance classmate about a former roommate, and even if Miya happened to know him, he might not realize that it was the very person about whom he was so curious.

Wow... I’m really graduating. Maybe it was the chilly air in the hallway, but I

was feeling cold again. For a moment there, I'd thought I was warm. The can of cocoa in my hand was tepid at best by now.

"Anyway, would you stop calling him 'Mister Roommate'? He has a name. Why don't you ever use it?" Hirano asked.

Oh! Uh... His name. What was his name again? Wait... Why didn't I just ask?

"Oh, y'know, I'm just not interested in remembering all the names of my friends' roommates."

No sooner had I said it than I sort of wanted to take it back. Calling him my friend, right out of the blue like that? What was I, a grade schooler?

Hirano didn't seem to mind, but he did give me a skeptical look. "And how exactly did you draw that line in the sand?"

It was a fair question—but a tricky one for me. I'd just always felt that way, but I'd never put the feeling into words. Eh, maybe Hirano would understand.

"Hmm... I know it's kind of arbitrary but take Ogasawara's girlfriend. I know her name, but I don't wanna use it. I feel like it's a line I don't wanna cross, see?"

We'd gone to school together, so I talked to her sometimes, and she'd even come to my house—but only with Ogasawara. I didn't really feel like she was *my* friend—just someone I wouldn't have had any connection to if it weren't for Ogasawara.

After a beat, Hirano said, "Are you tellin' me I shouldn't use Miyano's name?"

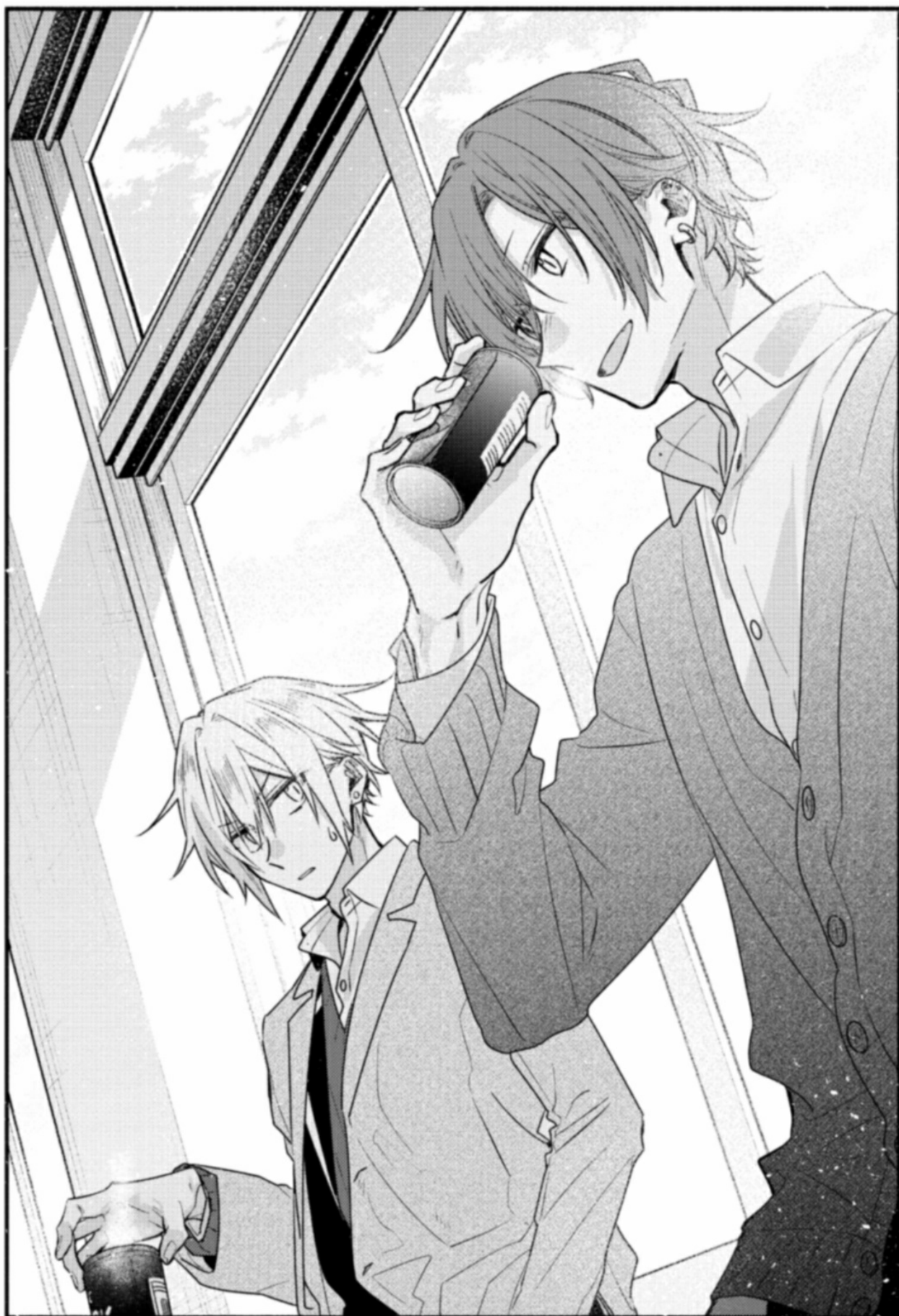
Okay. Maybe I wasn't quite getting through to him.

I knew the whole subject probably didn't matter that much to Hirano, but once he was listening to me, I felt like I had to explain.

"No, it's fine. I mean, you know him through the committee and everything. But like, for example, Ogasawara's got an older brother, and I would never, ever want him to use Miya's name."

Heck, I never even used Ogasawara's brother's name. I wouldn't go so far as to say I didn't want him to find out that Miya existed, but just imagining him acting like he knew Miya when all he had to go on was hearsay tore me up

inside. Even if, hypothetically, he was saying something positive.



Hirano thought about that for a moment but continued to look puzzled as he said, “You have some kind of problem with that guy?”

Oh, so that’s what he thought I was saying. This was tough. Maybe Hirano didn’t quite understand it—he had a small enough personal bubble to live in a dorm, after all.

“No, he’s cool.”

“Okay... Well, Hanzawa’s got a brother, too. Don’t want him using it, either?”

I admired how strong Hirano was, to be able to enter into someone else’s thinking like this instead of turning away. I wondered if he ever found himself brought up short by how hard it was to genuinely talk to people. Not that I had any intention of asking him.

“Nah, guess I wouldn’t,” I said. I gave my ever-cooling cocoa another shake to keep it from settling.

“Huh. I think I get it, sort of.”

“Yeah?”

I never would have talked to him like this if graduation hadn’t been just around the corner. It put me in a bit of a funk, knowing it was coming—but it wasn’t such a bad feeling.

“Basically, and I guess this is kind of a broad way of putting it, but you don’t want people outside your group—like your friends and family and stuff—to go trampling on *your* relationships.”

“Ahh. Yeah. That might be it. I think that’s the right idea.”

It made me feel like someone was intruding into my heart. And the opposite was the same: I didn’t want the stress of knowing things I didn’t have to know.

“Heh. I guess if I heard some guy who didn’t really know Miyano spreading rumors about him, I’d be pissed, too,” Hirano said. He looked dead serious.

“You feel responsible for him as a senior committee member?”

“Maybe. I mean, I’m not sure. I guess if Miyano said he really didn’t care, then I wouldn’t push it.”

I felt like I was seeing it for the first time: my point of view, from Hirano's perspective.

"Would you still feel that way even if we weren't talking about Miya? What if it was someone you were really close to? What if somebody took an interest in that person, and you didn't know if this new guy was safe or not? Think you could be so laid-back then?"

I wasn't sure why I was asking. I wasn't that interested in knowing about Hirano.

"Dunno. What's the definition of *safe* here?" He cocked an eyebrow at me. Not like he was mad. More like he was really trying to understand.

"Not, like, someone who would get violent or hurt him. But, you know, someone paying a little too much attention to him."

I guess maybe I didn't do very well with people I'd just met or didn't feel close to. I got prickly around anyone who wasn't open and honest, and I never wanted to feel comfortable with them. If someone I couldn't feel comfortable around tried to cross that line, it drove me up the wall.

"Oh... I've never really given relationships and personal distance and stuff that much thought. Sorry, I know I kind of put you on the spot there," Hirano said awkwardly, and I couldn't help a wry smile.

"Everyone's welcome, that what you mean?" I asked.

"I don't know. I mean, it's not like people think I'm that easy to get along with in the first place. But to start out by assuming you can't live with someone, I think that's rude to the other guy. I'm not trying to criticize you; it's just, you never know what might cause someone to open up."

That was some perspective. But at the same time, Hirano was strikingly oblivious when it came to himself.

"Nah, Hirano, you've got lots of friends, right? And the underclassmen look up to you... Me, I think it would be a lot of trouble, trying to build those kinds of relationships."

Oh...

“Oops!” There I went, talking about trouble again.

Hirano heard me mumbling about it to myself and chuckled. “Haven’t heard that word from you in a while. And to think, back in first year, it seemed like everything was nothing but trouble to you!”

“I’ve been trying to be better about it,” I said.

If you thought of everything as trouble, it started to obscure who you were and what you wanted to do. I wasn’t exactly eager to become some world-beating go-getter, but if I stumbled somewhere short of positivity, my life would get colorless and gloomy. I’d decided I wanted to change that.

“But no way a guy who went to an underclass classroom as often as you did could think it was that much trouble!”

It sounded a bit like what he’d said before—but back then, I hadn’t been aware of it myself. When something was obnoxious, it really stuck in the memory, but if it was fun, you didn’t think about the work that had gone into it, and it didn’t seem like such a big deal.

“Well, it was for Miya...”

Huh! Somehow, just picturing his smile inspired me to work a little harder.

Our chat was interrupted by the bell. Class was over. Students flooded out of the classrooms, the halls suddenly bustling.

“Guess we’d better get back in there,” Hirano said.

“Yeah,” I said and trotted after him into the self-study room. I swung my arms and exhaled, feeling my concentration return.

Guess it had been a good break. Now I figured I could make it the next couple hours.

And when I was done, I would get to see the guy I loved—again.



Special Thanks!

To the writer, Kotoko Hachijo:

Our author for the Hirano and Kagiura novel, as well as the first Sasaki and Miyano book, and now this one! She really gets to the heart of the Sasaki and Miyano characters and packed way more moe into the stories than I expected based on my own plot outlines. She shows us Sasaki and Miyano from a wide variety of angles.

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Given the slew of stuff I was putting out this time, I understand that you were working with Sakurazawa for quite a while ahead of release. Thank you so much for helping this book stand out, sell, and reach everyone who wanted to read it. There's no way this series would have sold more than 1,000,000 copies without the sales department.

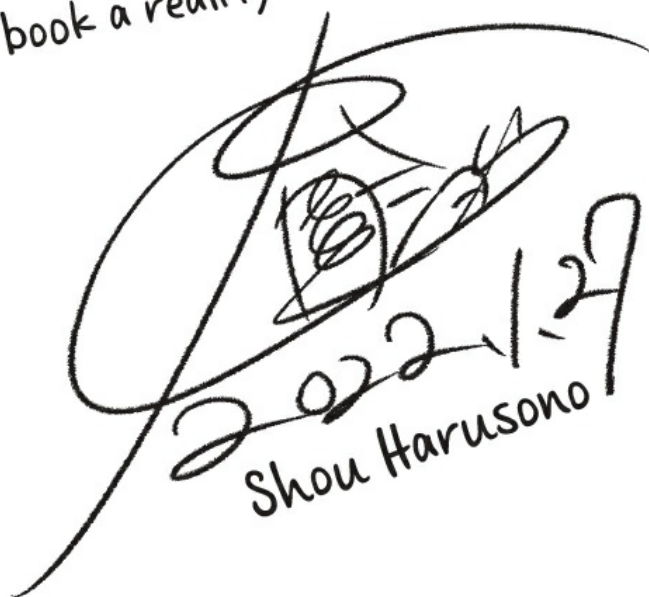
Thanks also to the printer, who comes up with beautiful printing despite the tight schedule; the delivery people who get everything to us safely; and all the bookstores and publishing people... There are so many people who helped this book become what it is. Thank you all.

Finally, thank you to everyone on Twitter and Pixiv who read and supported the original manga. Thanks to you, we were able to publish another book. And thank you to those who picked it up! Very much!

So many people gave their time, effort, and ideas to help make this book a

reality. Thank you all!

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effort, and ideas to help make this
book a reality. Thank you all!

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a large loop and a cross-like shape.

2022.1.27
Shou Harusono

Afterword.

Pleased to meet you, I'm Hachijo, the author of the Hirano and Kagiura novel, the Sasaki and Miyano novel, and now, this newest volume in the spin-off series. After we did the book about the first-years, I was so hoping we would get to work with the second-years, and now here we are. And about the time this book comes out, the anime should be running on TV, which is extremely exciting. Congratulations, Harusono!

Picking up where the last volume left off, we start with Kuresawa's story. His unaffected love for the people he cherishes makes him a rare and valuable friend for Miya, I think.

This made me realize that everyone has a story to tell, even Tashiro, who looks very bold with the way he treats everyone equally but strikes a balance, not being too wild or uninhibited.

I'm sure there must be plenty of readers out there who were hoping that the story of Miya's school trip, which was never told in the main series, would get a chance to come out somewhere along the line. Especially after it appeared in Volume 1 of the Hirano and Kagiura comics! Several parts of that story and this one overlap, so once you've read the story in this book, you might enjoy going back to look at that tale of a year ago... At least, I hope you will!

The discussion on the night of the school trip was a series of discoveries and "moe" moments based on Harusono's plot notes. I could watch a scene of these guys chatting forever. Being able to see these boys' school lives from a variety of angles is part of the charm of "SasaMiya."

The heart-pounding White Day episode... Well, I don't have anything further to say about that. Please enjoy the story!

The image of Sasaki and Hirano during free time was just me imagining how they would encourage each other if they bumped into one another during

exams.

Please take care of your health, everyone!

Finally, to Harusono, our editor Sakurazawa, everyone at the Gene Editorial Department, and everyone who played a part in getting this book into print, thank you—and thank you to all our readers!

Kotoko Hachijo

[Afterword.](#)

Hi there, Harusono here! We're delighted to release the second Sasaki and Miyano novel, following them into their second year. Thanks so much for reading! Kotoko Hachijo handled writing duties again. My thanks to her!

I was really hoping for a second novel, something that would show how the boys' relationships changed from the youthful naïveté of their first year to the more complex and varied relationships of their second. I'm so happy we were able to provide that.

In the first book, each chapter was written from a different perspective, so you could dip into whichever story you felt like reading at any given time. For this volume, although the chapters are still basically self-contained, they also flow into each other, which will hopefully make everything easier to follow.

The part in chapter 1 about opening the door wasn't in the original plot; that was Hachijo's touch. The first time I read it, I was screaming inside, like, "Ooooooh, Kuresawa! That's you! That's exactly the kind of guy you are!" Gosh, he's cute. He's got this urge to be cool that only shows up in the presence of his girlfriend, but he's not very good at it. Just your average awkward high school boy. Hachijo and I had exactly the same read on him, and I'm so grateful. The stuff in this chapter about a "show of gratitude" relates to chapter 40 in Sasaki and Miyano, Vol. 8.

Chapter 2 is pretty much "The School Trip: The Boys' Love Talk with a whiff of Hirano and Kagiura." In the manga, Sasaki and Miyano don't have much to do with the story... Or at least, so I thought! We didn't get a chance to have an all-Hirano and Kagiura chapter in this book, but this seemed like a good opportunity to point Kuresawa in their direction. Personally, I love catching just a hint of other characters while we're experiencing some other perspective.

Chapter 3: White Day. For this one, we have a cameo by Niibashi, who shows

up in Hirano and Kagiura. He's sort of to that series what Kuresawa is to Sasaki and Miyano. I happen to like that kind of person.

Chapter 4 is Sasaki and Miyano's take on White Day. This takes place between the graduation ceremony at the end of Volume 7 of the manga and the beginning of chapter 40 at the start of Volume 8. I was eager for Volume 8 to start with the third-years in April, at the beginning of the school year, so I put this idea aside, thinking I might try it as a bonus story sometime.

Chapter 5 is the story of Hirano and Sasaki in chapter 32 of the manga (Volume 6). As with the rest, it's something that didn't quite make it into the comic. I really wanted to include this story, so we did it, even though they're both third-years. (Their friends are second-years, so it still counts.) Hirano and Sasaki tended to regard each other as "classmates," but I wonder if, by the time they graduated, they'd become friends. Each of them can be lively and cheerful when he's with someone he's close to, but when they're with each other, suddenly they go quiet.

There's not much eye-catching action in this one; this is a story of Sasaki slowly getting his thoughts together. The restrained atmosphere lent itself to monologues, something you can really only do in a novel. I'm so glad we got to do one!

So there you have it. This novel gave me another chance to bring out a bunch of stories I'd been looking for an opportunity to tell. It probably would have taken me a good year or two to draw them all myself, so I'm happy they could see the light of day in this format.

If you have a chance, please feel free to send us your thoughts!

Attn: Kotoko Hachijo and/or Shou Harusono

c/o Yen Press

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

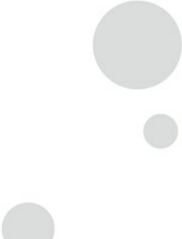
New York, NY 10001

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2022.1.27
Shou Harusono



Sasaki and Miyano





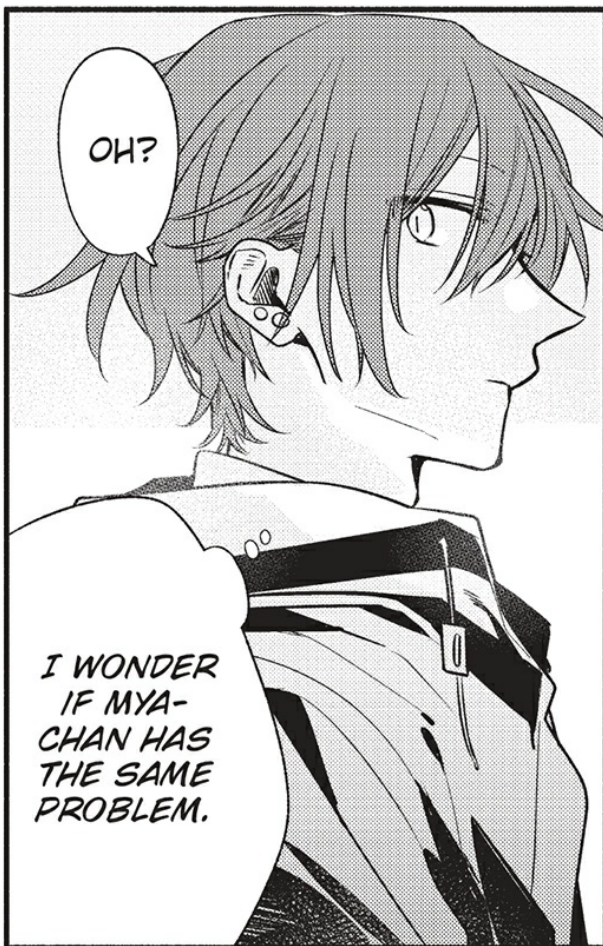
The Japanese
edition of this novel
includes bonus manga.
Flip to the back of the
book, read right to
left, and enjoy!

TRUE.
HE'S
FREAKIN'
HUUGE...



BUT
YOUR
ROOMIE'S
EVEN
BIGGER
THAN ME.

Y'KNOW,
YOU'RE
NOT
REALLY
ALL THAT
SHORT
EITHER...

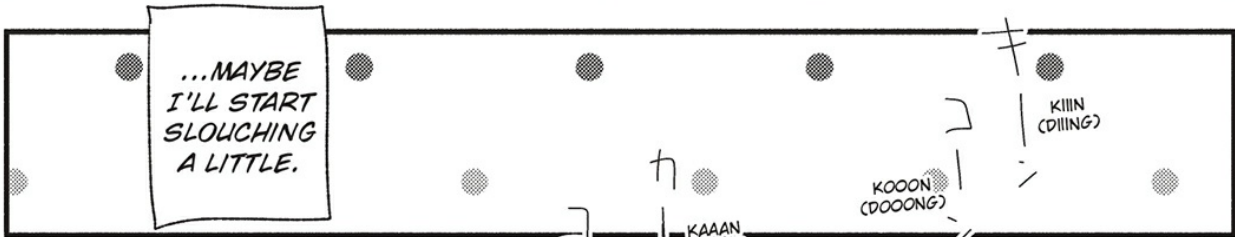


OH?

I WONDER
IF MYA-
CHAN HAS
THE SAME
PROBLEM.



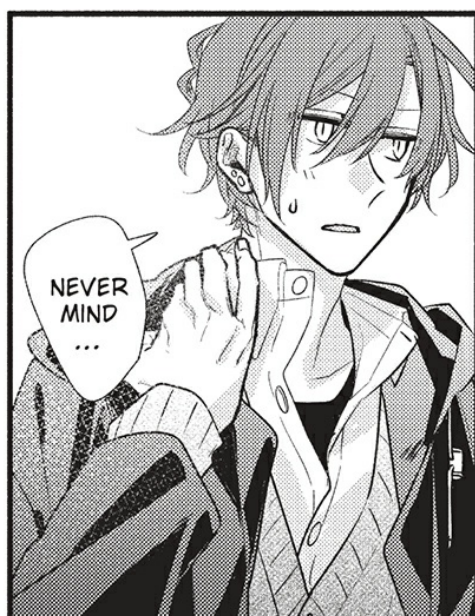
TALKING
TO HIM
SOMETIMES
GIVES ME
A CRICK IN
MY NECK!

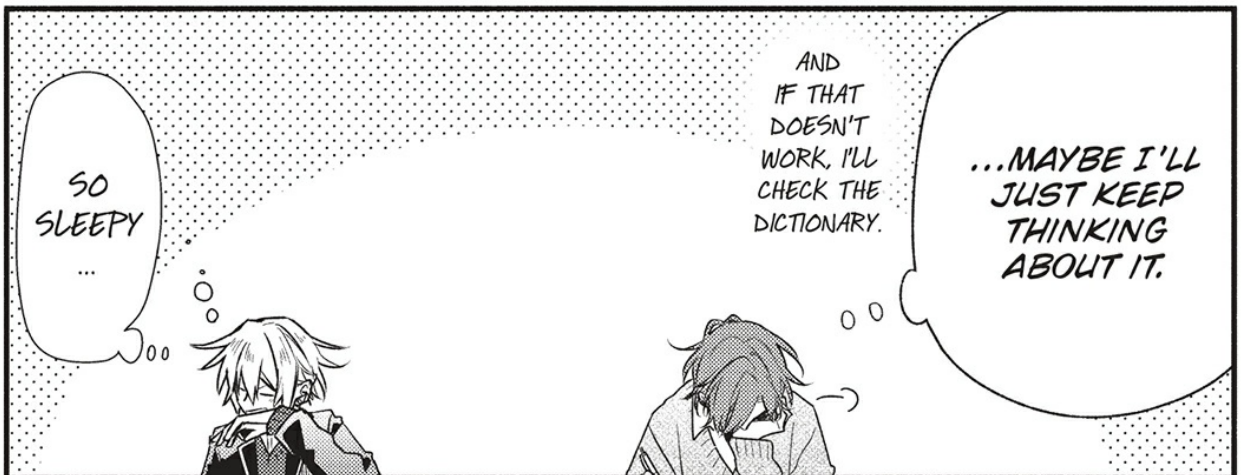
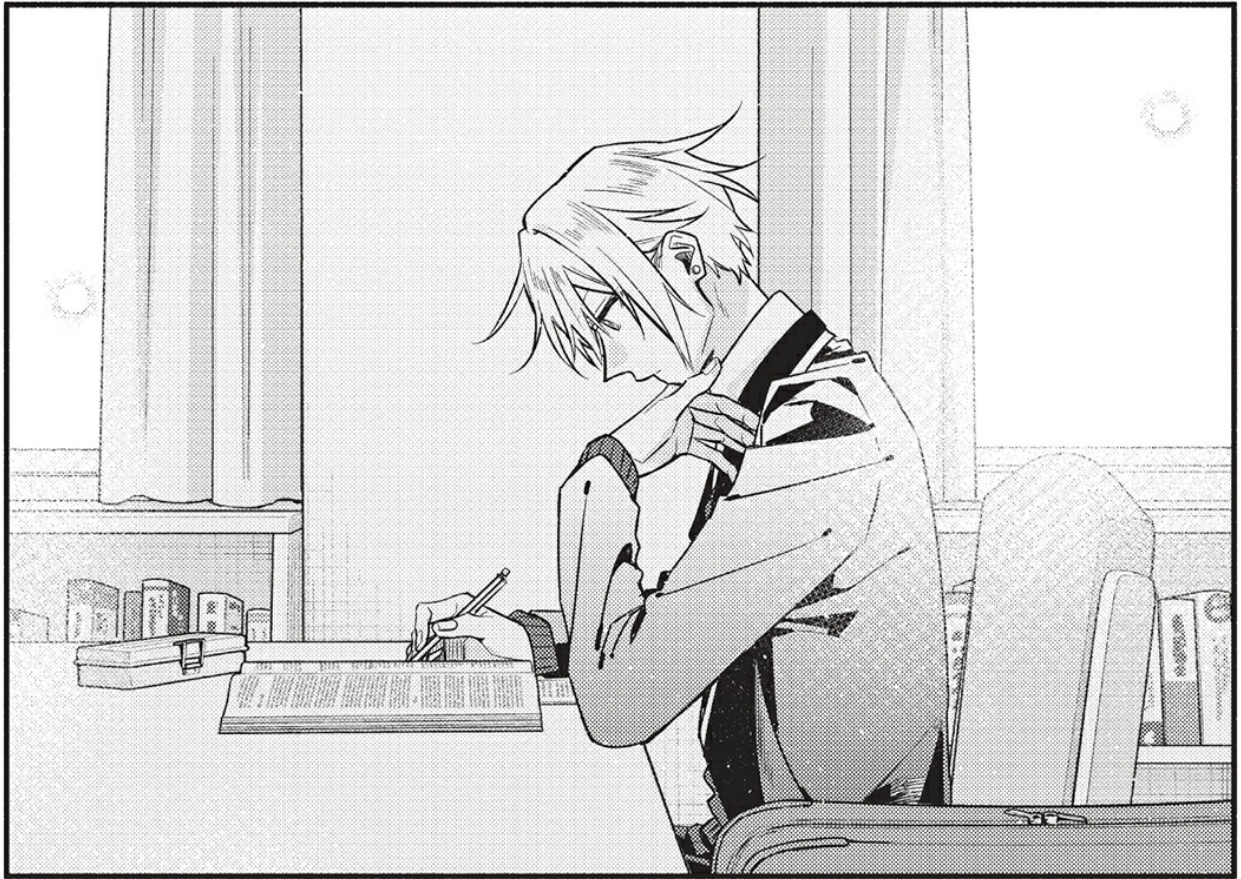


...MAYBE
I'LL START
SLOUCHING
A LITTLE.

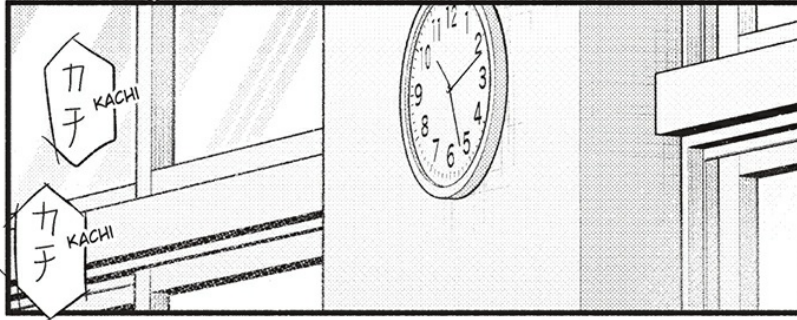
HE GOT SCOLDED LATER.

END





SELF-STUDY GUYS.





KEEPING THEM GUESSING EVEN AFTER GRADUATION.

PIERCING PERCENTAGE.

I WAS
JUST
THINKING
...

...A LOT
OF OUR
SENPAIS HAVE
PIERCINGS.



I'D BETTER
TELL MY
GIRLFRIEND!

**WAIT,
HANZAWA-
SENPAI
HAS A
PIERCING!?**

YEAH, I
SAW IT WHEN
I BUMPED
INTO HIM ON
A DAY OFF.



SASAKI-
SENPAI,
HIRANO-SENPAI,
OGASAWARA-
SENPAI,
HANZAWA-
SENPAI...

NOW
THAT YOU
MENTION
IT, YEAH.

'SCUSE
ME.

SORRY.



BONUS

A SHORT, LITTLE SOMETHING.

IT KINDA REMINDS ME OF HIRANO-SENPAI...



IT'S COOL. MY BAD.

OH, SORRY.

A BLOND BEAUTY WITH LOOKS SIMILAR TO THAT KEY CHAIN ...?

C'MON, SERIOUSLY. WHAT KIND OF BLOND BEAUTY LOOKS LIKE THAT!?

YOU BUYING THAT?

YEAH. LOOKS LIKE HIS STYLE.

THE HECK ARE YOU BUYING ...?

CAN'T SHOW IT TO YOU 'TIL WE GET HOME.

TASHIRO BOUGHT A GUN.

THANKS FOR WAITING.

I GUESS THERE'S PROBABLY SOMEONE OUT THERE WHO FITS THAT DESCRIPTION...



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